

DR. PRIESTLEY'S QUEST

Mysterious warnings are sent to the murder victims instructing them to avoid the places where their corpses are afterwards found, and this, not unnaturally, preys upon the mind of the recipient of the second of these documents. All precautions taken to preserve his life are in vain. It is a spine tingling plot, but Doctor Priestley's fortunate discovery of a packing case of unusual manufacture, held together with brass screws, puts him upon the track of the very last person who could reasonably be suspected of the crime. The book ends with a dramatic *denouement* of an ingenious campaign of assassination.

Dr. Priestley's Quest

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CHAPTER ONE

THE WARNING

DR. PRIESTLEY took the piece of paper which his visitor held out to him, glanced at it for a moment, then passed it over to me.

“Your eyes are younger than mine, Harold,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you will be good enough to examine this document of Mr. Heatherdale's and describe it to us. But facts, mind, facts! Conjecture is all very well, but in a case like this it may prove most misleading.’

Thus adjured, I took the proffered paper and held it in the circle

of light thrown by the reading-lamp which stood on the Professor's table. We were sitting in the study of his house in Westbourne Terrace, on a chill autumn evening which made the warm blaze of the fire very welcome. This and the single reading-lamp were the sole sources of light in the room; it was the Professor's whim thus to sit in semi-darkness, especially when he had one of his deeply-loved problems to consider. And this evening fate had been kind to him. I, who knew him so well, could see the incipient light of battle in those shrewd eyes lurking behind their broad-rimmed spectacles. For his visitor was none other than Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, and his first words had been, 'I have come to see you. Dr. Priestley, for I believe I have found something which may throw a fresh light upon my poor brother's murder.'

You may imagine that I examined the paper with the keenest interest. No one knew better than I—since it was his skill alone which had extracted me some months previously from a situation which had threatened to ruin my whole life—the Professor's methods of scientific deduction. Since this episode, which had gained a notoriety highly unpleasant to myself as the Paddington Mystery, Dr. Priestley had employed me as his secretary, and had been good enough to express himself pleased with my efforts to study his methods. But this was the first time he had entrusted me with the examination of a document of such importance, and I determined to justify his trust.

'It is a piece of writing paper, of the quality known as cream-laid, torn from an ordinary writing-pad,' I said slowly. 'It has no watermark or other trace of origin. There is no doubt about its having come from a pad, for there are traces of gum still adhering to the top edge. It has been folded into four, and the creases are soiled and worn as though it had been carried loose in a pocket or case among other papers. I should imagine—'

'I did not ask you to draw inferences,' interrupted the Professor sharply. 'Confine yourself to facts, please. Can you tell us anything more about the paper itself?'

'No, I don't think I can, sir,' I replied. 'It is a very ordinary type of

writing paper, of medium quality and weight, such as can be bought in pads from any stationer. It bears a single typewritten line, approximately in the centre of the page, typed apparently by a portable machine with a purple ribbon. This line is as follows:

"Keep away from Horn's Lane."

Mr. Heatherdale, who, since his entrance, had been fidgeting nervously in his chair, could contain himself no longer.

'You see!' he exclaimed. 'My poor brother's body was found in Horn's Lane. Whoever typed those words must have known something of the ruffians who murdered him. We have only to find out who it was, and we can bring them to justice. I know I can count upon your help, Professor.'

Dr. Priestley held up a deprecating hand. 'Of course, I will help you, Mr. Heatherdale,' he replied. 'My old acquaintanceship with your father would alone be sufficient inducement. But I fear that you are assuming too much. I remember the main facts of the case very well, but I fear that I did not follow it so closely as I should have done. Perhaps you will not mind refreshing my memory with the details?'

Mr. Heatherdale's face lit up with an expression almost of eagerness. He was a fussy, nervous little man, with a short, stubby beard, weak eyes and a pallid complexion. Whether with the excitement of his discovery or from a natural inability to keep still, he toyed continually with his pince-nez, placing them on his nose, taking them off again, wiping them with a handkerchief which would have served him as a winding sheet. I took him for a selfish, self-centred sort of man, the one event in whose life had been his brother's murder. I could imagine him telling the story to anybody who could be induced to listen to him. His childish delight at being asked to recount it was so evident as to be laughable.

'It happened rather more than a year ago,' he began, in an eager, rather plaintive sort of a voice. 'My brother Austin was living at White Pelham, on the borders of Essex and Hertfordshire. His house was about a mile from the village, and fully two from the station; a

most lonely spot, and I always had an instinctive aversion to it. However, my brother Austin and I rarely saw eye to eye, and we agreed to differ upon this as upon many other things. He had bought the place, in spite of my advice, some ten years previously, and always expressed himself as fully satisfied with it.

'He had written to me, a week before his death, telling me that he had some family business to discuss with me, and asking me to come and stay with him for a couple of days. If I may say so without disrespect to the dead, this was just like him. He might just as easily have come to see me, but yet, although he knew my dislike of White Pelham, he asked me to go there. I accepted, though, I fear, with rather bad grace, came up to town, and caught the 3.10 at Liverpool Street. That was on October 12th last year.'

The Professor nodded, as his visitor came to a dramatic stop. 'That was the date of the murder, I believe?' he said. 'When did you last see your brother alive?'

Mr. Heatherdale frowned. It was obvious that he was determined to tell his story in his own way and from his own particular point of view.

'We had a brief interview some two months previously, in August, to be exact,' he replied. 'But I can tell you about that later. As I was saying, I went down to White Pelham on October 12th. It was a tiresome journey; one has to change at Market Wenden, and take an exceedingly slow train from there. It was after five when I reached White Pelham. Austin's groom was waiting with a dog-cart in the station yard, and to my astonishment he asked me if I had seen his master. On questioning him, I discovered that Austin had gone up to London two days previously, leaving word that he would travel down by the same train as myself.

'We supposed that he had missed the train, since I had seen nothing of him at Liverpool Street, and he had certainly not been on the platform when we changed at Market Wenden. The groom drove me through the village to the house, where I was given a telegram which had just arrived. It was addressed to me and was from Austin, to the effect that he was detained in London and would come down to White Pelham by the last train, which arrived at 9.55.'

'Do you remember the exact wording of the telegram, Mr. Heatherdale?' enquired the professor encouragingly.

'I do, indeed!' replied his visitor. 'I am not likely to forget any incident of those terrible days. "Gerald Heatherdale White Pelham Detained here arriving 9.55 this evening Austin Heatherdale."

'You have no doubt that your brother actually sent the telegram?'

'None whatever. Why should there be any doubt? As a matter of fact poor Austin did actually travel by that train, only to meet a horrible death at the end of his journey. Besides, the police traced the telegram. It was handed in at London Wall post office shortly before four by a man who answered my poor brother's description exactly.'

'Is anything known of your brother's movements while he was in London?'

'All the essentials. He left White Pelham by the 9.15 train on the morning of Tuesday the 10th, arrived at Liverpool Street about eleven, and took a room at the Liverpool Street Hotel. He called upon his solicitor, Mr. Withers, whose office is in Coleman Street, between three and four that afternoon. He dined and slept at the hotel that night, and went out soon after breakfast on Wednesday. He came back to lunch and was then given a

telegram which had come for him. He read this, put it into his pocket, had lunch, and went out again shortly afterwards. About eight o'clock in the evening he telephoned to the hotel that he would not be back that night as he was staying with some friends, but that his room was to be kept for him. At about four o'clock on Thursday afternoon he rang up again, asking that the hotel porter might meet him at the platform from which the 8.5 train left, with his suit-case and his bill. The porter did so, and about a couple of minutes before the train started poor Austin ran up to him, snatched the bill from him, paid it in notes without waiting for the change, grabbed his suit-case and ran up the platform towards a first-class carriage. He got out of the train at Market Wenden; the station-master there, on being questioned, remembered seeing him get into the White Pelham train. The ticket collector at White Pelham remembered taking his

ticket as he passed the barrier. It was a foggy night and the train was late. It was nearly half-past ten when my poor brother set out on his last walk.'

Mr. Heatherdale paused, and the Professor nodded sympathetically. 'I see,' he said slowly. 'Your account is remarkably lucid, Mr. Heatherdale, but there are one or two supplementary questions I should like to ask, if I may. You say that your brother walked from the station. Neither you nor the groom met him in the dog-cart, then?'

'No!' replied Mr. Heatherdale with some asperity. That was one of the questions the police were most insistent upon. Poor Austin had a passion for walking, one of the many directions in which our tastes were diametrically opposed. It was an order at White Pelham that he was not to be met at the station unless he gave express instructions to that effect. No doubt the ruffians who murdered him knew this well enough. Even if he had more luggage than he could carry he would order the dog-cart, have the luggage put in it, and walk home himself. Of course, that is only when he used White Pelham Station. More often than not he would drive the eight miles to Leaford Junction, where he could catch an express.'

'How often did your brother travel by train, Mr. Heatherdale?'

Mr. Heatherdale shrugged his shoulders. 'Not more than a dozen times a year, I should imagine,' he replied. 'The life he led at White Pelham appeared to content him. He had a small farm and rented a few acres of shooting, and this seemed to take up most of his time.'

Professor Priestley glanced swiftly at me, with a look which I knew to mean that here was a point of which I was to take special notice. I was wondering what on earth it was, when I heard his next question.

'Is anything known of your brother's movements between lunch-time on the eleventh and 8 p.m. on the twelfth, Mr. Heatherdale?'

Mr. Heatherdale blushed, if the slight turbidity which appeared in his pallor can be dignified by such a name, blinked his eyes and fidgeted worse than before. 'Er—that is rather a delicate question,

Professor,' he mumbled at last. 'We were unable to discover the—er—friend with whom he—er—passed the night. Poor Austin was a man of extremely broad views, views which I should myself consider highly indecorous in a man of his age and position. At my request no very persistent effort was made in that direction. It would merely have added to the tragedy, had any breath of scandal touched the dead man. Besides, the point is immaterial. He returned from whatever—er—adventure he may have pursued, in perfect health and spirits, and was seen at Liverpool Street, Market Wenden, and White Pelham station. I, for one, should be most loath to pry into the secrets of the dead, whatever suspicions I may harbour in my heart.'

I could not help thinking that the late Austin Heatherdale must have been a more engaging individual than this hypocritical brother of his. But my thoughts were recalled from irrelevant speculation by the slightly irritating tones of Mr. Heatherdale, continuing his tale.

'I could see from the study windows that it was a foggy night, and I fully expected the train to be late. But when eleven o'clock came, and my brother did not arrive, I could only conclude that he had lost the last train, and that I should not see him before the morning. I may explain that I had had previous experience of such aberrations on his part; unpunctuality was one of my poor brother's vices. The household shared my view of the event, and I went to bed. I was awakened at seven o'clock next morning by a frantic knocking on my door. My poor brother's parlourmaid burst in on me, half-clothed. "Oh, sir!" she exclaimed. "The master's been murdered, and the police are here!"'

Again Mr. Heatherdale paused dramatically. Dr. Priestley leant forward in his chair and gazed intently at his visitor.

'Yes, I remember,' he said. 'You went to where the body was found, did you not?'

'I was one of the first to see it,' said Mr. Heatherdale with a tinge of pride in his tone. 'A labourer had found it not an hour before, and had had the sense to go straight to the police station with his news. The village constable recognised my poor brother, and promptly

sent a message to the doctor and to the house. The doctor and I arrived nearly simultaneously. My poor brother was dead and cold, lying doubled up on the ground with marks of the rope with which he had been strangled round his neck. There was no doubt as to the motive; his pockets had been rifled, the suit-case he must have been carrying had disappeared, even a gold signet ring he always wore had been taken from his finger. There were signs of a struggle all round the body— my brother was a big, powerful man, and his assailants must have had considerable trouble in overpowering him. He had been set upon, murdered and robbed by a gang of ruffians who had been lying in wait for him.'

The Professor nodded. 'Exactly,' he said. 'I remember that that was the conclusion reached at the inquest. But where exactly was your brother's body found?'

That brings me to the significance of the paper I have just shown you!' exclaimed Mr. Heatherdale triumphantly. 'I must explain that the road from the station to my brother's house runs through the village of White Pelham, then turns sharply to the left, where it becomes a main road from London to the eastern counties. But there is a short cut which leaves the road from the station to the village a few hundred yards from the latter and comes into the main road a quarter of a mile or so before my brother's house. This short cut is nothing more than a field path with a couple of stiles, to begin with. It then enters a disused road, completely grass-covered, and almost overgrown with brushwood, which runs in a shallow cutting through a fairly thick coppice. My brother's body was lying in this disused wood, at a point about a hundred and fifty yards from the main road. And the name by which this disused road is known to the country people is Horn's Lane.'

'Ah!' exclaimed the Professor. 'So that the warning received by your brother was justified. His body was found in the very spot which he had been recommended to avoid. Very interesting, very interesting indeed, Mr. Heatherdale.'

'Of course, it is perfectly obvious what happened,' continued Mr. Heatherdale, distinctly gratified. 'My poor brother was in the habit of

carrying fairly large sums of money loose in his pocket, and doubtless this characteristic was known to many people. A gang of ruffians, who knew his habits, had determined to waylay him in this solitary spot and rob him at the first convenient opportunity. One of the gang, afraid of the consequences at the last moment, sent him this warning. Austin, who was of an exceedingly obstinate disposition, chose to disregard it. He left the station about half past ten on the evening of the twelfth, and most imprudently took the short cut home. Everything was in favour of his assailants; there was a considerable fog, and nobody but my brother would use Horn's Lane so late. The ruffians had about eight hours in which to escape before their dastardly deed was discovered.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' said the Professor. He remained lost in thought for a minute, then asked a further question.

'How did you come to find this warning, Mr. Heatherdale?'

'After my poor brother's death all his personal effects were sent down to my house in Wiltshire. They have lain there in a lumber room till yesterday, in the packages in which they arrived. I decided at last to sort them out and dispose of such of them as were worthless. Most of the pockets of my brother's clothes were full of old letters and pieces of paper with memoranda of various kinds upon them. Amongst them I found this, and promptly sent you a telegram asking for an interview.'

'I suppose there was nobody who could benefit in any way by your brother's death?' suggested the Professor.

Mr. Heatherdale began to fidget worse than ever. 'As a matter of fact, I am the only person to benefit financially to any considerable extent,' he replied in an aggrieved tone. 'I was placed in a most awkward situation by my poor brother's tragic death. Perhaps I had better explain the circumstances.'

'I should be very glad to learn them, if you have no objection,' replied the Professor.

'You knew my father slightly, I believe,' said Mr. Heatherdale. 'He was a shipowner of some importance. The Heatherdale line of cargo steamers was his own creation, and he managed it entirely by

himself until he sold it on very favourable terms to the Ocean Trust, Limited. He was a man of somewhat peculiar views, and took a far keener interest in his business than in his family. After my mother's death, which took place shortly after Austin and I had left school, he made over to my brother and myself the income from a capital of fifty thousand pounds each and told us to make our own way in the world as best as we could.

'I need not enter into our histories since that date. The temperaments of poor Austin and myself were mutually uncongenial, and we saw very little of one another, as of my father, who after his retirement from active business, had taken a lease of Brackenthorpe Manor, in Yorkshire. My father, as you know, Professor, died three years ago, at the ripe old age of eighty-two.

'His will was in no way extraordinary. After bequeathing certain legacies to old friends and employees, he left the balance of his not inconsiderable fortune to my brother and myself in equal shares. We have neither of us married, and in the event of either of us dying in that state, the reversion of the sum left to us in his will was to go to the survivor. If he in turn died single, the money was to go to a distant branch of the family settled in New Zealand, who are at present represented by a Dr. Heatherdale, of Wellington, and his daughter Freda. Some years before my father's death, Dr. Heatherdale was in England, and took the trouble to go to Brackenthorpe Manor to see him. My father took a great fancy to this distant relation, of whose existence he had previously been ignorant, and it was shortly after this visit that his will was drawn up.'

'I suppose that Dr. Heatherdale is aware of the terms of this will?' suggested the Professor.

'Certainly. Mr. Withers, the solicitor, wrote to him at my father's death. Judging from his reply, it was a complete surprise to the doctor. He appears to be comfortably off, and not likely to benefit personally by the will, as he is many years older than my brother or myself. But, of course, on my death, his daughter Freda will inherit a considerable fortune.'

'Did you or your brother see this Dr. Heatherdale while he was in

England?' enquired the Professor.

'No. Neither of us were even aware of his existence till he had sailed again for New Zealand. We were both somewhat astounded when the terms of the will were made known to us.'

The Professor was silent for a moment. 'Thank you, Mr. Heatherdale,' he said at last. 'I think I see the position quite clearly. I remember something of the will now that you mention it. But was there not some curious provision about a ship in it? I seem to have some recollection—'

Mr. Heatherdale frowned, and made an expression of annoyance. 'There was, indeed,' he replied. 'It was the result of a ridiculous whim of my father. When he sold the Heatherdale line, he reserved one vessel, which he continued to manage more as a hobby than anything else. He was a man of very strong convictions, which he held in the teeth of all opposition. About a couple of years before his death, a young ship-builder somehow got in touch with him, and explained a new idea he had of ship-construction. I do not profess to understand these matters, but it seemed that my father believed in its possibilities. At all events, he sold his old vessel, and built a new one on the system, which he called the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. He was convinced that a prolonged trial would prove this vessel to be superior in every way to anything else of its class. And he contrived to ensure that a prolonged trial should be given to it.'.,

Mr. Heatherdale laughed softly and bitterly.

'The responsibility was thrown upon my brother and myself,' he continued. 'I must explain that neither of us had the slightest knowledge of, or interest in, ship-owning. Poor Austin preferred a country life, and I — well, I am something of a student, and am lost away from my books. By my father's will, the value of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* was split into three equal parts, divided between my brother, myself and the ship's captain, a man of the name of Murchison. And, would you believe it, we were not to sell either the vessel or our shares in it, or even to lay the vessel up, until a period of twenty years had elapsed since the date of its launching. If we failed in this condition, my brother and myself lost the benefit of

my father's money, which then went straight to the New Zealand Heatherdales, and Captain Murchison similarly forfeited a legacy of five hundred pounds a year, left to him in the will. So my brother and I, and now I alone, were saddled with an incubus which causes us a lot of unnecessary worry. Did you ever hear of anything so absurd?

The Professor smiled. 'Scarcely absurd,' he said gently. 'But I can quite sympathise with your feelings. But what happens in the event of the death of one of the partners? On your brother's death, for instance—'

'Oh, that was very carefully provided for,' replied Mr. Heatherdale bitterly. 'On the death of any one of us, our share was divided between the survivors. If we all died before the end of twenty years, the unfortunate Dr. Heatherdale was bound to carry on the burden. Not until the end of that period were we free, and even then, whoever owns the vessel is to publish an account of its history at his own expense.'

'How extremely interesting!' exclaimed the Professor. 'Dear me, your father was a most far-sighted man. He wished to employ a portion of his wealth upon an experiment which would be of value to his fellow-shipowners and the community at large. May I ask whether the experiment is proving profitable up to the present?'

'Thanks to Murchison, who is a very capable man, on the whole it is,' replied Mr. Heatherdale, rather grudgingly. 'But, you must understand, there are occasions, connected with the freight market, the necessity for overhaul, and other things I do not profess to understand, when large sums of money have to be found for this ridiculous whim of my father. Inuring my brother's lifetime Captain Murchison was in the habit of applying to him on these occasions, and Austin and I shared the liability later.'

'The *Brackenthorpe Manor* happened to be in port when my poor brother was murdered and, of course, Captain Murchison came to the funeral. He sought me out afterwards, and I never saw a man in such a state of worry. He explained that half the ownership of the vessel was now his, and that, unless I would promise him my

support, he foresaw ruin for himself when the vessel became old and unremunerative. I reassured him as best I could, but I could see what his real fear was. There is a remote possibility that I myself might not survive the period—I am not over-robust, as you may have noticed, Professor—and if I were to die, Captain Murchison would, indeed, be in a tight corner. He dare not sell, on pain of losing his only source of income, and he would be compelled to run the ship until his creditors forced sale upon him. My father meant to prove his benefactor—he had a very high regard for Murchison, who had been in his service since boyhood, and he had the most complete faith in the earning powers of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*—but, in the event of my death, he is far more likely to prove his ruin.'

'A remarkable situation, indeed,' said the Professor. 'This is, indeed, a most interesting story which you have told us, Mr. Heatherdale.'

'I am glad it appeals to you,' replied Mr. Heatherdale curtly. 'I must confess that I regard the *Brackenthorpe Manor* and everything connected with it as an unwarrantable interference with the even tenor of my life. But I fear that I have strayed rather far from my subject. What do you think I should do in view of the discovery of this warning addressed to my brother?'

'Take it to the police, my dear sir,' said the Professor without the slightest hesitation. 'They have at their disposal means for identifying such things. I will, if you like, give you an introduction to my friend Inspector Hans-let, who has just been promoted to Scotland Yard.'

Mr. Heatherdale's face fell perceptibly. 'I should be very grateful if you would do so, Professor,' he replied. 'But—I had hoped—'

Professor Priestley smiled austere. 'You expected that I should immediately declare to you the names and addresses of your brother's murderers,' he suggested. 'Now you have stated a large number of facts, which provide food for cogitation. If mature reflection enables me to suggest any line of investigation likely to lead to fruitful results, I shall be happy to communicate it to you.'

'Thank you, Professor,' replied Mr. Heatherdale, rising from his chair. 'I shall be very glad to hear from you if you have anything

to suggest.'

I showed him out of the house, and watched him hurry off along the empty pavement, before returning to the genial warmth of the Professor's study.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORY *VERSUS* FACTS

'WELL, Harold, what do you make of Mr. Gerald Heatherdale?' was the Professor's greeting.

'I hardly know, sir,' I replied. 'Seems rather a queer fish on the whole. A bundle of nerves, I imagine, with a remarkably selfish outlook on things. I shouldn't be surprised if he knew more about the murder than he pretends.'

The Professor shook his head. 'We have no facts to support such a theory,' he said. 'Indeed, such facts as we have point rather the other way. I imagine this Mr. Heatherdale to be of a type that would avoid anything which would disturb the humdrum comfort of his daily existence. Connivance at a murder is bound to bring a certain mental discomfort in its train, and I suggest that Mr. Heatherdale's instinct is to avoid any symptom of discomfort, mental or physical. No, I expect that he told us the truth, that is, the truth as he sees it.'

'Surely, sir, in a matter of fact there can only be one truth?' I replied.

The Professor smiled grimly. 'You think you've caught me out, young man, do you?' he said. 'Because I insist in season and out that you should train yourself to recognise facts as the only firm foundation of existence, you imagine that truth is absolute—a fact in itself, so to speak? Not at all, truth is relative, as we are beginning to learn that everything else is. Let me demonstrate my meaning. Three people, whose interest it is to tell the exact truth, witness an event or series of events, say an accident in the street. Immediately subsequent to the event, each of them separately gives his account of it. In all probability, these three accounts will differ in the most

important particulars. Yet each account is true from the point of view of the narrator.'

I smiled inwardly, while retaining as attentive an expression as I could manage. Dr. Priestley was in the habit of assuming the lecturer's manner, as I knew from experience. But I also knew that if he were allowed his head, he would almost always evolve something of interest from his text.

'The problem facing the seeker after facts is, therefore, to project these various points of view upon a common plane,' he continued. The incident of this piece of paper is merely another example of the ease with which the untrained attention may be diverted from another very important feature of this case, which up to now seems to have received very little attention.'

'And what is that, sir?' I asked.

The Professor made a gesture of impatience as he replied. 'In my eyes the most striking fact about the death of Mr. Austin Heatherdale is that we know nothing of his movements for at least sixty-two hours before the discovery of his body.'

'Know nothing of his movements, sir?' I exclaimed. 'Why, I admit that nobody seems to know where he spent the night of the eleventh and the morning of the twelfth, but apart from that one gap, his movements seem to be pretty thoroughly verified.'

'A most interesting point,' said the Professor reflectively. 'Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body is found in a particular spot at a particular time, under circumstances which fit in exactly with his expected movements, as revealed in a telegram to his brother. The obvious inference is that he arrived at White Pelham by the last train on the evening of the twelfth, and that he was waylaid and murdered on his way home from the station. I want you to observe that subsequent enquiries were made by persons who were quite convinced of the truth of this inference, and that the information they obtained tended to confirm their belief in every respect. But, I ask you, suppose that Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body had not been found? Suppose that he had merely disappeared, vanished, leaving no trace, as people have been known to do; would

the same enquirers have been equally satisfied with the irrefutability of the evidence of the movements of the deceased?'

'I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, sir—' I ventured.

The Professor grunted. 'My point is plain enough,' he retorted. 'I want you to appreciate the difference in the mentality of a man who is seeking evidence to support a preconceived theory, and of a man who is, so to speak, groping in the dark. Let us suppose that Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body had not been found, that his murderers, if you like, had taken it away with them or otherwise disposed of it. After a certain lapse of time his non-appearance would have caused surprise and enquiries would have been made. In what direction would you have set out upon an investigation?'

'I should have endeavoured to trace the dead man's movements from the time he left home, exactly as the police appear to have done,' I replied confidently.

The Professor nodded his head in agreement. 'Precisely. I should have done so myself,' he replied. 'You would have discovered that an individual giving the name of Mr. Austin Heatherdale booked a room at the Liverpool Street Hotel on the same morning as the dead man actually left home, ostensibly for London. I have no doubt that the police compared the signature in the hotel register with that of the dead man, and satisfied themselves as to its genuineness. That is really the only evidence you would obtain that Mr. Austin Heatherdale even entered the hotel at all. You will remember that his brother told us that his visits to London were infrequent. Even if on each of these visits he stayed at the same hotel, you would find it difficult to induce any of the staff to swear to his identity, unless he possessed some marked peculiarity or idiosyncrasy, which apparently he did not. You would, at the most, establish a strong probability that the dead man did actually stay at the hotel in question.'

'Yes, sir, but surely—'

The Professor waved his hand impatiently.

'Listen!' he commanded. 'This is a most important point, for the subsequent evidence of the hotel people is based upon it. If the

man who stayed at the hotel on the night of the tenth was Mr. Austin Heatherdale, we may possibly be able to establish further facts as to his movements. If he was not, we have only one point of departure, the visit of Mr. Austin Heatherdale to his solicitor on the afternoon of that day.

'Now, as it happens, I have a very slight acquaintance with this Mr. Withers, through Sir Francis Heatherdale, and from my knowledge of him I think myself justified in assuming at present that he is in no way concerned in the death of his client. If this assumption is correct, we may accept Mr. Withers' evidence as trustworthy, and we can therefore state as a fact that Mr. Austin Heatherdale was alive in Coleman Street—which, as I may point out, is close to Liverpool Street—at 4 p.m. on October 10th. Further than that, we really know nothing.'

It seemed to me that the Professor had made very heavy weather of a very simple matter, but naturally I refrained from saying so. In my own mind I regarded the murder of Mr. Austin Heatherdale as a remarkably simple crime. Nor could I see the point of worrying about his previous movements, when a body, identified as his beyond any question, had been found within a few hundred yards of his own house. Still, if the Professor strove to treat me to a demonstration of logic, I had no choice but to listen.

'Now, if we assume for a moment that it really was Mr. Austin Heatherdale who left the Liverpool Street Station Hotel at, say, 2.30 p.m. on the eleventh, we have merely shortened the period of enquiry,' he continued. 'We still have forty hours to account for. And it is precisely these forty hours that yield no tangible facts. Dismiss from your mind for the moment the fact that Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body was eventually found; imagine that you have to trace the movements of a man who has merely disappeared. What points of evidence have we bearing on those movements? Let us review them in chronological order.'

'About 8 p.m. on the eleventh, a telephone message was received at the hotel, stating that the caller was Mr. Heatherdale, that he would not be back that night, but that his room was to be kept for him. Now

as evidence of Mr. Heatherdale's movements, this is utterly valueless. It may have been Mr. Heatherdale who telephoned, or it may not. It is extremely improbable that the clerk who took the message was acquainted with Mr. Heatherdale's voice, and in any case similarity of tone on the telephone is no evidence of identification.

'We have no further trace of Mr. Austin Heatherdale until the following afternoon, that of the twelfth. Then two events occurred, apparently within a few minutes of one another. A second telephone message was received by the hotel, making the appointment for the porter to meet the 8.5 p.m. train with Mr. Heatherdale's suit-case and bill, and a telegram was despatched from London Wall post office to Mr. Gerald Heatherdale by a man answering in every respect to the description of Mr. Austin. Does anything strike you as peculiar in these events?'

'Why, no, sir,' I replied. 'Mr. Austin's wire was explicit enough. He was delayed, he would catch the last train home, he had no time to go to the hotel, so he would meet the porter on the platform. It seems quite natural to me.'

'Does it?' said the Professor severely. 'Well, I confess that I find a number of questions incapable of satisfactory reply. London Wall Post office is within a couple of minutes' walk of Liverpool Street. If Mr. Austin handed in his telegram himself, it seems curious that he could not find time to call in at the hotel in person. Further, if he were delayed in the City, as one might infer from his being at London Wall, it would have taken him no longer to walk through the hotel on his way to the train than it would have to reach the platform by the station entrance. Lastly, consider the question of his identification at the post office.'

The murder made a great sensation at the time; I have no doubt the London evening papers of the thirteenth were full of it; finding of the body, description of the murdered man, and so on. The effect of this kind of thing on the psychology of the average man or woman is marvellous. London Wall post office is a busy place. Now, suppose the body had not been-found, that the papers had made no mention of Mr. Austin's disappearance. Do you suppose that enquiries made at a busy post office regarding a telegram signed by an unknown

name would have produced an accurate description of the sender?'

'No, sir, I suppose it wouldn't,' I agreed. 'But anyhow, there would be the hand in which the original was written.'

'An excellent point,' commented the Professor approvingly. 'Submitted to an expert, the original telegram might be made to yield valuable evidence. But, with everyone convinced that Mr. Austin had written it, with the vital importance of the point unperceived, was it ever so submitted? I doubt it. Mr. Austin was in a hurry, and he probably used the post office pencil, blunt, stumpy, and difficult to handle. The resultant scrawl was probably quite near enough to Mr. Austin's writing to satisfy anybody who was convinced that he had written it.'

'Now let us suppose that this message was not, in fact, written by Mr. Austin, but by somebody who resembled him in general outline. The post office officials had no doubt read some account of the murder. Imagine the thrill they would experience at the appearance of a real detective, asking if anybody remembered the sender of a telegram signed Austin Heatherdale! Of course, they remembered; I have no doubt the detective acquired a wealth of detail. Perhaps a faint recollection of the sender actually remained in the mind of the clerk who accepted the telegram. Imagination would supply the rest. There cannot have been a moment's difficulty in establishing the fact that Mr. Austin presented the telegram himself.'

The Professor laughed scornfully and continued.

'It is so fatally easy to secure evidence in support of a pre-conceived theory, especially when your witnesses are as convinced of the truth of that theory as yourself. Mr. Austin Heatherdale had travelled down to White Pelham by the train leaving Liverpool Street at 8.5 p.m. on the twelfth, and had been murdered on his way home from the station, between 10.30 and 11 p.m. on the same night. White Pelham at least must have been ringing with the news by the time the police commenced their enquiries. I suppose they began with the ticket collector at White Pelham station. Had he seen Mr. Austin leave the station that evening? The man must

have realised the sudden importance to which the tragedy had raised him. Why, he must have been one of the last people who saw the murdered man alive! Oh, yes, he had seen and recognised him, surely enough.

'Now you probably know as much of the conditions prevailing at these small wayside stations upon the arrival of the last train on a foggy autumn night as I do. The train is late, the staff are intent upon one thing only, shutting up the premises and going home to bed. Outside the station it is pitch dark; the platform is feebly lighted by as few oil lamps as possible. At the barrier stands the collector, with a lantern in his hand, the rays of which he directs upon the ticket which each passenger hands him. Had the body not been found, had the collector merely been asked whether Mr. Jones, who travelled to London and back three times a week, had on that particular night come back by the last train, what would have been his reply? Even had he replied positively in the affirmative, would you have accepted his evidence as conclusive on the subject of Mr. Jones' identity?'

'No, I suppose not,' I replied. 'But, after all, it is a very small point, since, in fact, Mr. Heatherdale's body was found early next morning.'

'Exactly!' exclaimed the Professor. 'That is the reasoning which biased this investigation from the very beginning. It never occurred to anybody that the ticket collector did not even know Mr. Heatherdale by sight. His journeys to London were infrequent, and as often as not he used Leaford Junction, on a totally different line, which would take him to King's Cross. If any of the railwaymen between Liverpool Street and White Pelham could have identified Mr. Austin, even in broad daylight, they must have remarkably retentive memories. Yet the station master at Market Wenden, *upon being questioned*, or, in other words, after considerable suggestion and prompting, was no doubt prepared to swear he had seen him change trains on that particular evening.

'There remains the hotel porter who waited for the departure of the 8.5 p.m. train from Liverpool Street. Exactly the same reasoning applies to him. It is extremely unlikely that he was sufficiently familiar with Mr. Austin to be enabled to identify him with certainty.

Yet here at least we have something tangible. Somebody, sufficiently similar in appearance to the Mr. Austin Heatherdale who had stayed at the hotel to satisfy this man, hurried up to him almost at the last moment, paid the bill without waiting for the change, snatched the suit-case and entered the train. Was this Mr. Austin Heatherdale himself? I repeat that we have no facts whatever with which to answer this question. The most anyone can say is that since the body was found next day between White Pelham station and Mr. Heatherdale's house, there is reason to suppose that this person was Mr. Heatherdale. I, as a logician, can go no further.'

Then at last I began to get an inkling of what the Professor had been driving at all this time.

'But, surely, sir, if it wasn't Mr. Austin Heatherdale, there must have been someone impersonating him, someone who knew his plans and his movements!'

'That is a possible alternative,' agreed the Professor. 'Were we to assume the existence of such a person, we should be led into a very wide field of speculation, unprofitable because of the practical impossibility of verifying our theories after this lapse of time. But the very existence of such an alternative is of great importance in another direction. From the very first I have been extremely dissatisfied with the motive attributed to this murder. It is most unusual in this country for a gang of footpads to track down and murder a man for the sole object of securing what articles of value he may have about him. If we could establish the fact that someone was impersonating Mr. Austin, this motive would become even more inexplicable. The time and trouble spent in the process would hardly be repaid by any booty which the gang might secure.'

'Besides, sir, if Mr. Austin did not travel down by the 8.5 from Liverpool Street, how was it that the body was found between the 'station and his house?' I put in. 'I take it the first train in the morning had not arrived.'

'You can discover that from Bradshaw,' replied the Professor. 'In any case, there would hardly have been a sufficient interval for the body to become cold and stiff by the time it was found. No, if you allow yourself to conjecture that it was not Mr. Austin Heatherdale

who travelled down by that particular train, you are, in my opinion, bound to revise the commonly accepted estimate of the motive for the murder.'

'By Jove, sir!' I exclaimed. 'Suppose Mr. Austin Heatherdale went up to London to fetch something of value, something easily portable, such as jewelry, and some gang of expert thieves got to know about it! That would supply a more likely motive than the casual footpad theory.'

But the Professor received this suggestion coldly. 'My dear boy, you are allowing your imagination to run away with you,' he replied. 'The facts surrounding the death of Mr. Austin Heatherdale are of great interest, and I recommend you to endeavour to formulate a theory which can be reconciled with them. Not that I imagine anyone could solve the mystery with the facts at our disposal. Still, the attempt would be an invaluable exercise for your reasoning faculties. Dear me, that is the dressing gong! I had no idea it was so late.'

The Professor rose abruptly from his chair, and I hastened to follow his example. When engaged upon the consideration of a problem which had captured his interest, he would allow everything but his meals to go by the board.

'The surest way of maintaining mental efficiency is to pay the strictest regard to physical well-being,' he would say. 'The brain requires regular supplies of sustenance to an even greater extent than the body. Dinner should have at least as important a place in the daily time-table as study.'

So, bearing this rule in mind, I deferred the case of Mr. Heatherdale for further consideration later.

CHAPTER THREE

THE TELEGRAM

PERHAPS I should explain that at this time I was staying with Dr.

Priestley in his rather gloomy house in Westbourne Terrace. April, his daughter, to whom I was then engaged, was doing a round of visits in the country, and the Professor had insisted upon my leaving my rooms and bearing him company.

There was certainly plenty for me to do. The Professor was engaged upon the compilation of a book which was to refute all existing theories upon comets and their orbits, and such time as I could spare from arranging and rearranging his notes was spent in looking up references at scientific libraries all over London. I have no doubt that the book, when it is eventually published, will create a sensation, for in it its author casts scorn upon the whole scientific world for its inability to appreciate the importance of facts. For, as irreverent reviewers said of a previous work of his, the Professor had a nose for facts as a pig had for truffles.

So it happened that I had very little time to consider the case of Mr. Austin Heatherdale. Occasionally, during the days that followed his brother's visit, my mind strayed towards the subject, but I confess I was principally intrigued by the peculiarity of the whole story. The Heatherdales, it seemed to me, must be a queer family. The Professor had told me something of the father, Sir Francis. He had been a man of one single idea, the business which he had himself built up and the problems connected with it. It must have been a bitter blow to him that neither of his sons evinced the slightest interest in ship owning. I smiled as I thought of that queer provision in the will, by which they were bound to subsidise his last and dearest experiment. What a chance for anyone with a spark of enthusiasm to make good, to produce something really useful and at a relatively small cost! Yet here was this miserable creature, the only surviving son of an able father, begrudging every penny he had to lay out, lacking the courage to shoulder the only burden his father had ever laid upon him! I felt very sorry for this Captain Murchison, dependent upon a man who regarded the whole business with definite abhorrence.

The murdered brother seemed to me, from the little I had heard of him, to have been a better fellow altogether. I gathered that he had

merely been bored with the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, grudging time rather than money devoted to her. I was quite sure that he would never have spoken of a fine ship, his father's greatest conception, as 'it.' Murchison could have counted, if not upon active assistance, at least upon sympathetic financing, so long as Austin was alive. What a blow to this hardworking sailor his death must have been! Fancy having to argue with Gerald over every penny that had to be spent upon their joint possession!

I knew enough about the position of the shipping trade to realise that the *Brackenthorpe Manor* could not possibly show a profit over the period of twenty years, owned and managed as she was, whatever her constructional merits. As one of a line of regular traders she might have had a chance, but, precluded from being laid up, forced to take whatever casual freights might offer, she was bound to be a constant drain upon her owners. And I am afraid that, while feeling sorry for Murchison, I rejoiced in the thought that Gerald Heatherdale would have to put his hand even deeper in his pocket as the years went on. Serve him right!

But all this was beside the point. The problem that the Professor had set me was that of evolving a theory of the death of Austin Heatherdale which would fit in with the facts as he had demonstrated them. Rather to my astonishment he referred to this once or twice during the days that followed Gerald Heatherdale's visit, usually when we were drinking our port after dinner. I had to confess that I saw no solution which would fit in with the probabilities. At this reply he smiled and shook his head, until at last I was goaded into direct attack.

'Have you formed any theory yourself, sir?' I countered at last, one evening when he had enquired as to my progress with the problem.

'No I have not,' he replied. 'I have scarcely considered the matter at all. I gave Mr. Heatherdale the best advice in my power, which was to refer any fresh fact with which he may become acquainted to the police. I can scarcely be expected to interest myself in a matter of this kind a year after the events have taken place. Yet, if I had the leisure, I believe that I could suggest one or two interesting trains of thought.'

Not a word more would he say. And it seemed as if the police were as content to let the matter rest as Dr. Priestley himself. Inspector Hanslet, an old acquaintance, came to see us one day, ostensibly to thank the Professor for sending Gerald to him with his precious warning, actually, I expect, to glean any hint that the Professor might let fall.

'There is no doubt at all in this case,' he said confidently. 'I admit it is unusual for a gang to go as far as to murder a man for what he happens to have on him, but there are some pretty customers about just now, as we know to our cost. I had a look into the documents myself. These fellows must have been on Mr. Heatherdale's track for some time, and his coming home by the last train like that was their opportunity. Our people are doing everything they can with it, but you can't trace a casual bit of paper like that.'

'So you think that the murderers of Mr. Austin Heatherdale will never be found, Inspector?' suggested the Professor.

'Oh, I wouldn't go so far as to say that,' replied Inspector Hanslet hastily. 'We're not nearly so fast asleep as some people are fond of making out, not by a long way. One of these days some member of the gang that murdered Mr. Heatherdale will get caught in our net, probably on another charge, and then we'll bag the lot.'

'I hope you will, Inspector,' observed the Professor gravely.

And with that the matter dropped. For my own part, I never expected to hear anything further. The Professor was obviously right; it was no earthly use trying to dig up fresh facts about a year-old crime when the whole ground of enquiry had been thoroughly covered by the police already. I should not have given the problem another thought, but for the fact that I knew the Professor pretty well by this time. It was quite obvious to me that he was dissatisfied with the footpad theory, and that his minute examination of the dead man's movements during the day and a half preceding the crime was in some way responsible for this dissatisfaction. But I also guessed that so far his criticism was destructive rather than constructive, that he had no alternative theory capable of proof. And for Dr. Priestley even to mention a theory supported only by

conjecture was unthinkable.

So, on the comparatively rare occasions when I thought about the business, it was the Professor's remarks rather than Gerald Heatherdale's which intrigued me. Of course, as the Professor had demonstrated, it was quite possible that Mr. Austin Heatherdale had never been to the Liverpool Street Station Hotel at all. Alternatively, it was possible that he had, but that the man who had travelled down by the 8.5 p.m. train to White Pelham had not been Mr. Heatherdale, but someone impersonating him. Impersonating him consciously, too, for he had taken his suit case from the hotel porter and paid his bill. Again, the impersonator must have overheard Mr. Heatherdale's telephone message to the hotel, or must have sent it himself. But why this impersonation, and what became of the impersonator after he left White Pelham station that night? For it was beyond question that the body found was that of Mr. Heatherdale. And if Mr. Heatherdale had not travelled down by the last train—and, in spite of the Professor's sophisms, the whole weight of evidence seemed to me to point to the certainty that he had—how in the world did it happen that his body was found between the station and his house, in a lane he was known to use, and had probably been warned against?

Apart from Gerald the only people who benefited in any way by Austin's death were this mysterious Dr. Heatherdale and his daughter, and they only indirectly. Both brothers had to die before they succeeded to the estate; though Austin's death certainly brought them a step nearer. Could they be in any way connected with the crime? I had to admit that it was difficult to see how. They were presumably at the other side of the world, and even had they been on the spot the same objections applied to their complicity in the crime as applied to Gerald.

There remained only one person to be considered. It was a favourite maxim of the Professor that any enquiry into the death of an individual should begin with the last person who it could be proved had seen the deceased alive. In this case, according to the Professor, this person was Mr. Withers, the solicitor. Yet what possible

interest could an elderly family solicitor have in the death of one of his clients? Gerald had mentioned no legacy or anything of the kind by which Mr. Withers could benefit. Mr. Withers must be left out of the question.

I had to admit to myself that I could think of no reason why anyone should go to the trouble of murdering Austin Heatherdale. It was to be presumed that the affair had made a considerable stir at the time, that the police had made a pretty searching investigation. On this assumption one could rule out the possibility of any external and obvious motive; a personal quarrel, for instance, or anything of that kind. Somebody, either the dead man's brother or one of his household, would have known something about it. Unless, of course, the footpad theory had been so firmly established that no one had troubled to look any further. Hang it all, it *must* have been footpads, there was no other possible solution.

After his first few enquiries as to the progress of my reasoning, the Professor made no further remarks on the subject. I imagined that it was useless to begin a fresh investigation so late in the day, and he certainly had more important things to think about. But I felt that it was just the kind of case that would have interested him, had he been consulted at the time, when the scent was fresh. I made a few notes, chiefly relating to Gerald Heatherdale's story and the Professor's comments upon it, and ceased to worry myself any further.

One day, several weeks after Gerald Heatherdale's visit, I came into the Professor's study about teatime. I had been out all day, searching for a rare book in all sorts of likely and unlikely places suggested by the Professor. I had failed to find it, and was feeling tired and peevish, certainly not in the mood to take down a quantity of hard scientific facts from dictation. It was with a feeling of relief that I found the Professor, not, as I had expected, surrounded with a litter of papers covered with his almost illegible writing, but sitting at his desk, looking intently at a telegram spread out before him.

He looked up as I came in. 'Well, my boy, did you find that book?' he asked briskly.

'No, sir, I'm afraid I didn't,' I replied. 'Nobody seems even to

have heard of it, and it isn't in any of the catalogues.'

'Ah, well, perhaps it does not matter for the present,' said the Professor. 'I am sorry you had your work for nothing. Here, look at this.'

He picked up the telegram and handed it to me. It had evidently just been delivered; the time of receipt was barely half an hour earlier. It had been handed in at Allingford, at 3.7 p.m., and was addressed to Dr. Priestley. The message it bore was: 'Implore you come down at once by six-thirty from Paddington most urgent will meet you at Pirton Station at nine forty-two this evening beg you not to fail me Heatherdale.'

'Well, what do you make of it?' enquired the Professor, as I handed it back to him.

'Mr. Gerald Heatherdale again, I suppose, sir,' I replied. 'He seems very anxious to see you. Are you going?'

'Certainly I propose to go, and to take you with me/' said the Professor gravely. 'I do not know what Mr. Heatherdale hopes to gain by my presence, or why, if this need for me is so urgent, he did not come up to London and so save three hours at least. But, since he has appealed to me, I intend to answer the appeal. A day in the country will do neither of us any harm. I have ascertained that there is a dining-car on the train, and have informed Mary that we shall be away to-night.'

I went upstairs to pack my bag, marvelling at the Professor's decision. I didn't like Gerald Heatherdale, and I'm afraid I cared nothing for his emotions. To me, it looked as though he were badly scared about something; I even wondered if I was right, after all, about him knowing too much about his brother's death. Perhaps the blackmailing had begun, or some fresh clue had come to light which threatened to expose his guilt. I chuckled as I thought that if this was the case the Professor was the very last person to help him out. Anyhow, the episode was not unwelcome as a variation from the routine of life.

The Professor was ready before me. His first words when I joined him in the hall surprised me.

'Take a good heavy stick with you,' he remarked. 'And remember if you find it necessary to employ it in self-defence, use the point. A cut can easily be parried; a thrust, firmly delivered in the ventral region, usually takes your opponent by surprise, and temporarily incapacitates him.'

'Good Lord, sir!' I exclaimed. 'You don't imagine—'

'I imagine nothing,' replied the Professor testily. 'I am not in the habit of allowing my imagination to run away with me. Do as I tell you. We must take into account the possibility that Mr. Gerald Heatherdale did not send that telegram. I have no doubt that the neighbourhood of Pirton station is remarkably dark on a moonless December night.'

'Look here, sir, if you think there's likely to be any trouble, let me go alone,' I said. 'If it's all right, I can send you a wire in the morning. I can easily make some excuse to Heatherdale.'

'Certainly not!' replied the Professor. 'I am not yet, I trust, too old to be fully capable of looking after myself. Now, step outside and call a taxi.'

CHAPTER FOUR

MR. HEATHERDALE'S ALARM

IT WAS, of course, quite dark by the time we reached Pirton station. A fine misty rain was falling and the few passengers who got out of the train shivered dismally on the exposed platform. It struck me that a very similar scene must have greeted Austin Heatherdale when he arrived that evening by the last train at White Pelham. Had the same thought struck Dr. Priestley, and was this why he had told me to bring a serviceable stick?

But I was left little time for speculation. Hardly had we stepped on to the platform, when a carefully muffled-up form, which I recognised instantly as that of Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, bustled up to us and peered intently into our faces.

'Oh, thank God you've come, Dr. Priestley!' he exclaimed. 'I was in terror lest you should have been out, and had not got my wire in time. And you have brought Mr. Merefield with you! How very thoughtful of you. I cannot have too many friends about me at this juncture.'

'You forget that I am as yet ignorant of the cause of this summons,' replied the Professor mildly.

Mr. Heatherdale peered nervously round, like a frightened rabbit.

'Hush!' he whispered. 'A most terrible thing—I will tell you about it when we get home. Somebody might overhear us here.'

We had been walking down the platform as we talked, and were now, opposite the door of the waiting room, where a solitary lamp was burning. The Professor laid his hand upon Mr. Heatherdale's arm, and drew him towards the open door.

'Come in here a moment, please,' he said soberly.

The cheerless little room was deserted, and the three of us entered unnoticed. The Professor led the way to the lamp, then turned to me. 'Shut the door, Harold,' he said. 'Now, Mr. Heatherdale, unbutton your coat, please.'

For the first time I had the opportunity of seeing the man's face, and I could hardly restrain an exclamation of astonishment. Sheer stark terror was written all over it; the lips twitched continuously, the eyes wavered and peered anxiously into every shadow. As we stood there a motor bicycle somewhere on the road outside gave a loud bang before settling down to a steady chatter. Mr. Heatherdale gave a low moan and almost fell into the arms of the Professor, who was standing close in front of him.

'Forgive me!' he said shakily. 'I thought that was a shot—my nerves are all on edge, I fear. Unbutton my coat, did you say? Certainly, certainly. One moment—'

He would, I am sure, have obeyed unquestionably any order the Professor might have given him. He was as a man in a dream, only half hearing and understanding what was said to him. One thing and one thing only had possession of his brain; beyond this he had scarcely thought or feeling.

Dr. Priestley put his hand upon the trembling man's shoulder. 'No, it does not matter about the coat,' he said gently, as though speaking to a child. 'I only wanted to make sure, but never mind. Now, Mr. Heatherdale, you are quite safe with us. Shall we proceed to Allingford?'

'By all means,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'I have a car waiting outside. It is not more than a quarter of an hour's drive.'

We left the waiting-room and passed through the ticket barrier into the darkness of the night. Outside the station entrance the road felt muddy to the feet. We were dazzled by the lamps of a car, which sprang into life at our appearance. A voice somewhere said, 'Here you are, sir!' and the car moved forward. I recognised the familiar lines of a four seater Ford, and guessed it to be the local hire car.

'Is this your car, Mr. Heatherdale?' said the Professor in a half-whisper.

'No, I do not keep a car,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'It belongs to Mr. Lawson of the Chequers. I always hire it to come to the station.'

The Professor took an electric torch from his pocket and directed its rays upon the car. 'Do not bark your shins as you get in,' he said. 'These little torches are most useful on a night like this.'

He laid his hand on Mr. Heatherdale's arm, and then, as if by accident, let the light fall upon the man at the wheel.

'Is that the regular driver?' he whispered.

'Why, yes,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'That's young Lawson, the owner's son. Mr. Lawson never lets anyone else drive.'

'Very well,' said the Professor. 'Harold, you go in front with the driver. Mr. Heatherdale and I will sit behind. Give me the suitcases. There now, you may start.'

Young Lawson proved a taciturn individual, and replied to my attempts at conversation in almost inaudible monosyllables. After a couple of essays I gave it up, and devoted my attention to the route we were following.

We seemed for the most part to be travelling over fairly level ground, by a series of narrow lanes which turned and twisted most

confusingly. Signposts appeared for an instant now and then in the light of the headlamps, bearing the names of hamlets I had never heard of. I did manage to make out that whenever a post bore the name Allingford we followed it, so presumably we were on the right road. At frequent intervals large drops from overhanging trees spattered against the wind-screen.

Suddenly a sharp, short rise appeared in front of us,' and as we breasted it I made out on either side the parapet of a hog-backed bridge. Beyond the parapet I fancied I saw the gleam of water. Once over the bridge the engine took on a deeper and more laboured note, and I realised that we were going up hill. The hedges on either side receded; strips of turf began to edge the sides of the road. Evidently the type of country was changing; we were leaving the closely-wooded valley and entering a more open region. We could not be far from the house now.

We swung round a corner, and right in front of us I saw a few dim lights. A few roadside cottages appeared, dim and distorted in the drizzle. Then a high wall, towering above us, with a tall chimney beside it. Beyond this a lamp hung over an open door, by the light of which I read, 'Licensed to sell Wine, Beer and Spirits.' Then the car slowed down, swung suddenly through a gate and entered a short and narrow drive. I made out the outline of a low, ivy-covered house, and an apparently carefully-tended garden. Then the car stopped, and young Lawson, with the air of one who has brought his appointed task to a successful conclusion, sank back in his seat with a grunt.

Mr. Heatherdale was the first to alight. 'I will ring the bell,' he said. 'My servants have orders not to answer unless the bell is rung in a certain manner. I have to take precautions—'

We waited in silence for two or three minutes. Then the door was suddenly flung open, revealing a cosy-looking hall within. But instead of the trim parlour-maid I expected to see, a burly-looking man in corduroys appeared in the entrance, blinking his eyes as he endeavoured to pierce the darkness without.

I stood for a second staring at him stupidly, wondering what sort

of establishment this was where the gardener acted as footman.

I was brought back to a sense of the proprieties by the sound of Mr. Heatherdale's voice.

'It's all right, Reuben. These are the friends I went to the station to meet. Will you come in, Professor, and you, too, Mr. Mere-field?'

The gardener grunted and disappeared. We followed our host into the hall, where a bright fire was burning. Mr. Heatherdale fussed around till we had disposed of our hats and coats, then turned to us apologetically.

'Will you excuse me for a moment?' he said. 'My housekeeper, Mrs. Milton, has been so upset by this fearful trouble that she has retired to her own room. I must give some instructions for the preparations of a room for Mr. Merefield. I shall not be many minutes.'

He bustled out of a door which closed softly behind him, and I turned eagerly to the Professor.

'What in the world is it all about, sir?' I enquired in a low tone. 'I never saw a man in such a state in my life.'

'I know no more than you do, my boy,' replied the Professor. 'But no doubt we shall very soon know. Keep your eyes and ears open, and neglect no fact, however insignificant it may appear. I believe that very shortly we shall be brought face to face with a very interesting problem.'

Whatever might be the condition of our unfortunate host, the Professor was evidently in his element. A problem of any kind was as the breath of his nostrils; since our arrival at the station, he had acquired an alertness of speech and of manner which I had not seen for many months. For the moment he contented himself with scrutinising the room with the closest attention, until Mr. Heatherdale appeared again.

'Will you come into my study?' he said nervously. 'I am most anxious to tell you the whole story, and get your advice how to act. I will lead the way if you will allow me.'

He took us through another door, down a quiet passage, and into

a room which I felt at once was typical of the man. My first impression was that, if a large and up-to-date furnishing firm had been given an order to equip a study regardless of expense, this was exactly what they would have turned out. The principal object was a polished mahogany desk, covered with various trivialities, each in its obvious and exact place. Other tables, also mahogany, were placed to the greatest effect about the room, each with one or two leather-seated chairs beside it. The greater part of the wall space was taken up by massive bookcases with glazed doors, full of books in beautiful bindings arranged apparently according to size rather than subject. A very fine Persian carpet covered the floor, and massive tapestry curtains hid the windows, but not so completely as to conceal the fact that the shutters were closed. It seemed to me that it was the room of a dilettante, not of a man who had ever produced any serious work.

Our host made us sit down in a pair of very comfortable armchairs, and placed before us a small table on which was a plate of sandwiches, a decanter of whisky and a siphon. He himself stood up in front of the fireplace, the very picture of nerves; restless, almost incoherent.

'I wouldn't have put you to the trouble of coming down, Professor, if it hadn't been so terribly serious,' he began. 'I know you'll forgive me when I tell you. Since the mid-day post I have been living in fear of my life. I am threatened by exactly the same fate as overtook my poor brother, more than a year ago.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed the Professor. 'May I ask what form the threat has taken?'

'Just the same as in his case,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'A warning has been sent to me, a warning exactly like the one poor Austin received. Look!'

He plunged his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, and after some fumbling produced an envelope which he thrust into the Professor's hand. The Professor glanced at it, and then passed it over to me.

'Harold examined the first warning; it will be as well if he

examines this one also,' he said quietly.

I looked first at the envelope. 'The postmark is not very distinct, but I think the time is 10.45 p.m. and the date December 3rd. This is the fourth, so it seems to have been posted last night. Of the place of posting I can only read LON . . . C, which may be London, E.G., or London, W.C. After the year is a letter E or F, which may help us if it is necessary to trace the area in which the letter was posted. The postmark is accompanied by a printed stamp "British Goods are Best." The envelope is of a rather cheap quality, commercial size, about six inches by three and a half.

The address is "Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, Allingford House, Allingford, Wilts." and has been typewritten, probably with a portable Corona. On the back of the envelope is a blurred stamp, probably the postmark of the receiving office.'

Mr. Heatherdale fidgeted impatiently. 'Yes, yes!' he said. 'But look at the contents!'

I opened the envelope, which had been cut open with a knife, and drew from it a folded paper.

'A piece torn from a writing pad, and one not designed for folding into this size of envelope. So far as I remember the previous warning you showed us, Mr. Heatherdale, I should think this paper came from the same pad. I should say it had been handled by someone with dirty fingers, for although I can see no actual finger-marks, the creases are fairly smudged. Right across the page is typed, apparently by the same machine as the address, the words: "Keep away from Hilton Pennings."'

'There, you see!' broke in Mr. Heatherdale excitedly. 'It's just like the warning sent to my poor brother. The same paper, the same type, almost the same wording. Only in his case the place he was warned against was near his house, in my case it is near mine. He was found murdered in that very spot. What other fate can I expect but his?'

He sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands. I believe he would have burst into tears had not the Professor poured some whisky into a glass and forced it into his hands.

'Drink this, Mr. Heatherdale,' he said quietly. 'You require a stimulant to brace you after such a shock.'

Mr. Heatherdale obeyed him mechanically, then made an effort to rise.

'No, sit down and listen,' said the Professor, holding out his hand commandingly. 'I see no reason at all why you should share your brother's fate. You are, at all events, forewarned.'

'But so was he!' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'You remember, I found—'

'Yes, I know,' interrupted the Professor patiently. 'But, if I may say so, your brother, from what you have told us of him, was not the sort of man to pay much attention to such a warning. He had no experience of the penalty attaching to its neglect. Now you, on the other hand, know that in his case the warning was justified, and will, no doubt, act accordingly.'

'I will take any measures you suggest, now, at once,' said Mr. Heatherdale fervently.

'I must have time to consider the matter fully,' said the Professor. 'For to-night, at least, you are perfectly safe. Is the man you addressed as Reuben sleeping in the house?'

'Yes, and the under-gardener as well,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'I thought it best to have assistance at hand, in case—'

'The garrison is now reinforced by Harold and myself,' said the Professor. 'We ought to be a match for any gang of ruffians. The nearest houses in the village are not more than a hundred yards or so away, I noticed. We can safely wait until to-morrow to decide our future dispositions. Meanwhile, I should be glad if you would answer a few questions bearing on the matter.'

'I will try,' replied Mr. Heatherdale rather weakly.

'Thank you. In the first place, I infer that you received this message by the mid-day post to-day?'

'I did. Mrs. Milton and I were sitting in the hall, waiting for lunch, when the postman put it in the letter-box. Mrs. Milton took it out, gave it to me, and I opened it with a knife I carry for that purpose. I was so horrified that for the moment I could not speak. Then I

showed it to Mrs. Milton, who, naturally, was terribly upset, since, of course, she knew of the warning sent to my poor brother. Then I wrote the telegram to you, and Mrs. Milton arranged for Reuben and the under-gardener to come into the house.'

'Did she tell them the reason?' enquired the Professor.

'Oh, yes, of course,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'You see, it was entirely irregular. As a rule the men are not allowed inside the door. You know what it is with young servants—'

'So that we may assume that some garbled version of it is all over the village by now. Well, perhaps there is no harm in that. It will serve to concentrate attention on any strangers. Now, Mr. Heatherdale, I will ask you to be quite frank with me. Do you know of anyone who might possibly be anxious to do you an ill turn? I mean, anyone who might have a possible grudge against you?'

'Not that I know of,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'Of course, it is hard to say. I may have given unintentional offence in some unexpected quarter. But I have always led a very quiet life. I have never concerned myself needlessly with the affairs of others. I am horrified to think that this terrible conspiracy to murder me—'

Let me point out that you are jumping to conclusions, Mr. Heatherdale,' interrupted the Professor. 'The reception of an anonymous warning is no proof that any danger exists. The receipt of that piece of paper which you have showed us is capable of many explanations. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine how your death could benefit anybody to the extent of forming sufficient inducement to commit murder.'

Mr. Heatherdale leapt up from his chair. 'I cannot imagine why anyone should desire my life!' he cried. 'But then, think of poor Austin. Who benefited by that? What does it all mean, Professor? Why does this fate hang over my head—'

His highly-pitched voice ended in a sort of gurgle, and before either of us could spring to his aid, he fell face downwards on the hearthrug. The Professor and I knelt by his side, loosening his clothes and applying the usual methods of restoration. The Professor placed his hand upon the unconscious man's heart, then shook his

head gravely.

'This is a bad business, Harold,' he said in a low tone. 'Far worse than I imagined at first. Whoever sent that slip of paper, if indeed it was sent with malicious intent, had a remarkable knowledge of this man's psychology. He is quite likely to die of fright, even if no more active danger threatens him. All we can do for the moment is to attempt to reassure him, but I am afraid it will prove a hard task. Hush, he is coming round.'

We helped our host into one of the chairs, and after a few minutes he regained something of his scattered senses.

'I am afraid that the circumstances are too much for me—' he began dolefully, but the Professor cut him short.

'You have had a severe shock, Mr. Heatherdale,' he said confidently. 'All you require is a good night's rest in perfect safety. Now, if you feel you can walk, Harold and I can help you to bed without alarming the household.'

Mr. Heatherdale nodded, and between us we got him upstairs and into his room. The Professor looked round swiftly as I switched on the light.

'Where does that door lead to?' he enquired.

'Into my dressing-room,' replied Mr. Heatherdale.

The Professor strode up to the door and flung it wide open. 'Ah,' he said. 'I see there is a couch in here. Harold, you can get some bedclothes from your own room and sleep here for the night, with the door open. The windows of both rooms are shuttered, I see. You and Mr. Heatherdale will lock the doors leading into the passage. Now, Mr. Heatherdale, you will be quite safe in going to bed.'

The Professor and I walked into the dressing-room. 'Of course, I do not anticipate any attack on our host,' he said. 'A show of precaution seems to be the only thing to allay his fears, which are more nervous than anything else. I do not profess to understand the case as yet, but I think it would be as well not to let anybody but ourselves go near him till the morning. If this housekeeper—whom we have not seen, by the way—or any of the servants come to the door, do

not let them in. I happen to have some tablets in my bag which will ensure Mr. Heatherdale a night's rest.'

The Professor paused for a moment, lost in thought. Then he uttered an impatient exclamation. 'Speculation is the purest folly in a case like this!' he muttered. 'Facts, facts! We must obtain facts! Yet how are we to find out whether Mr. Austin Heatherdale received his warning before his death or not?'

And then, suddenly turning away, he strode out of the room, and left me to my vigil.

CHAPTER FIVE

A COUNTRY WALK

As the Professor had prophesied, nothing unusual occurred during the night. I heard Mr. Heatherdale turning restlessly for an hour or so, then all was quiet in his room. I dozed at intervals, and woke finally as the first ray of light came through the chinks of the shutters. Shortly afterwards I heard a knock upon my door, which I knew to be the Professor's. I opened the door, to find him fully dressed upon the threshold.

'How is our patient?' he enquired.

'Still asleep,' I replied. 'I have not heard a sound except a subdued snoring all night.'

'Good. He will sleep for some hours yet,' said the Professor. 'I am about to explore the house and its surroundings. If I meet any member of the staff I will give instructions that Mr. Heatherdale is not to be disturbed. You stay here till the breakfast bell rings.'

The Professor was right. Mr. Heatherdale did not stir while I was dressing. I went in to see if he was quite comfortable, and found him fast asleep, breathing regularly. Hoping for all our sakes that when he woke up his panic would have abated, I went back into the dressing-room. A few minutes later a softly-sounded gong suggested breakfast.

Guided by the sound of voices, I made my way to the dining room, where Dr. Priestley was already seated, engaged in earnest conversation with a middle-aged lady. He looked up as I came in.

'Ah, here he is, Mrs. Milton,' he said. 'Mr. Heatherdale is still asleep, I presume?'

I walked to the head of the table and shook hands with Mrs. Milton. She was a woman who might have been any age between thirty and fifty; one imagined that by some strange process she had contrived to grow old by definite steps, rather than by normal and gradual change. She was good-looking with no feature that would be described as out of the ordinary. The immediate impression one gained of her was of cheerfulness combined with efficiency, the very qualities one would expect of the house-keeper of a man of Mr. Heatherdale's age and temperament.

I reassured Mrs. Milton on the subject of Mr. Heatherdale's somnolence, and then devoted myself to the kidneys and bacon. It was the Professor's turn to play, and I had no idea of the direction in which he wished to lead the conversation. I soon discovered that he had no desire to lead it at all. He left it entirely to Mrs. Milton, whose store of local anecdote seemed inexhaustible. From first to last not a word was said of Mr. Heatherdale or of the purpose of our sudden visit.

'I must leave you gentlemen and attend to my domestic duties,' said Mrs. Milton at last. 'You know your way about the house, don't you? We usually sit in the hall in the morning, you'll find a fire there, and the papers will be here any minute.'

'As a matter of fact, I should rather like to explore the country-side,' replied the Professor. 'A walk will do both Harold and me good on a beautiful morning like this. Should Mr. Heatherdale wake, you can assure him that we will be back before lunch. By the way, do you happen to know if he possesses an ordnance map of this district?'

'There are a lot of maps in his desk,' said Mrs. Milton doubtfully. 'Perhaps you would not mind looking for yourselves. I am not quite sure what an ordnance map looks like—'

We were fortunate in finding the sheet of the one-inch survey which included Allingford and the surrounding country. The Professor glanced at it. Then he folded it up carefully and put it in his pocket.

'Come along, my boy,' he said. 'Let us go and take our bearings. This corner of Wiltshire is strange to me. We can do no more good indoors at present.'

We walked down the drive into the village, then took a road that led nearly due north. Ahead of us lay the rounded shoulders of the downs, seamed with curious terraces known locally as 'lytchetts,' and dotted here and there with round tumuli. The only sign of human habitation was a low square building upon the very summit of the highest of the hills before us. The road itself was narrow and winding, deserted but for an occasional farm cart.

The Professor took a deep breath of the bright, wine-like air. 'Ah!' he exclaimed appreciatively. 'An excellent morning for a walk, and one that conduces to clear thinking. Now, what do you make of all this?'

'Very little, sir,' I replied thoughtfully. 'If it were not for the warning which Mr. Heatherdale showed us, I should regard the whole business as pure imagination on his part. It is difficult to conceive a murderous attack upon an inoffensive country gentleman in a peaceful village like this.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed the Professor curtly.

'Yet you, in common with the rest of the world, are apparently quite prepared to accept the current theory of the murder of Mr. Austin Heatherdale. Do you imagine Allingford to be more immune from crime than White Pelham? I should be glad to know upon what grounds you base these assumptions, if so.'

'Well, no, sir, I suppose not,' I replied weakly. 'But, after all, Mr. Austin Heatherdale was not murdered in his own house.'

'When you can prove to me where he was murdered I will accept that statement, but not till then,' said the Professor. 'However, that is, for the moment, beside the point. Let us approach the question from the point of view of these so-called warnings, received both by Mr.

Gerald Heatherdale and his brother.

'The most striking thing about them is obviously their similarity. They appear to have been typed upon exactly similar sheets of paper by the same typewriter, the wording of the message is exactly the same in each case. Finally, they both mention an exact locality, situated in each case in the neighbourhood of the residence of the man to whom they were sent. When I glanced at the map just now I saw Hilton Pennings marked upon it. It is, if I am not mistaken, that clump of trees a couple of miles or so ahead of us. Now this exact similarity is highly suggestive. The sender of the second message has obviously taken great pains to make it appear that both originate from the same source.'

The Professor paused. We had reached a fork in the road, by which stood a signpost, wholly illegible with age. A few yards away, beyond the hedge, an old man was engaged in disinterring roots of some kind from a dump and loading them into a cart.

'Ask him which is the way to Hilton Pennings,' said the Professor.

I approached the hedge. 'Good morning!' I called out.

'Good morning to 'ee, sir,' replied the old man, resting on his fork. 'Fine and frosty it do be, to be sure.'

'Can you tell us which is the way to Hilton Pennings?' I said.

The old man shook his head with a vacant air. 'I never heard tell of 'ee, sir,' he replied. 'And I've lived in these parts, man and boy, these seventy years.'

'Why, Hilton Pennings!' I said. 'That group of trees over there, isn't it?'

The old man's eyes followed my pointing fingers. 'That be Marston's Copse, sir,' he said. 'Leastways, that's what we calls it. Belongs to Marston's farm over by the valley yonder. If that's what you be wanting, you're heading straight for it.'

I turned to the Professor, who had been following the conversation with great interest:

'Come on!' he said. 'No doubt Marston's Copse is a local name for Hilton Pennings. That throws a new light—however, I am anticipating. We were speaking of the subject of similarity between the

two messages. Now those messages were sent for a purpose, and we have to determine what that purpose was. The obvious and alleged purport of the message is in each case to warn a particular individual against a specified locality. We have to remember that Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body was actually found in the locality against which he had been warned. Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, a man of a nervous and morbid type, naturally lives in terror that one day his body will be found in the locality against which he has been warned. And to my mind, this suggests the true purpose of the messages.

'Remember, no theory is tenable unless it is supported by uncontrovertible facts. But, at this stage, it is legitimate to found tentative theories upon probabilities, then to set them ^{UP} like ninepins, and bowl facts at them as these facts come to light. Let us assume that some unknown person has a reason for wishing to reduce Mr. Gerald Heatherdale to a state of terror. We need not for the moment enquire into this reason. It may range from a simple desire to drive him from the neighbourhood of his house to a far more complicated plot. That person, knowing Mr. Heatherdale's psychology, would know that the surest method of attaining his end would be to threaten Mr. Heatherdale with the same fate that overtook his brother. Now suppose that person had access to Mr. Heatherdale's house. He could prepare the first warning, knowing the locality in which Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body had been found, carry it about in his pocket till it assumed the state in which we saw it, then put it in the place in which it was found. Some weeks later the second warning is despatched to Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, and produces exactly the effect desired. Upon this hypothesis, the matter resolves itself into an extremely heartless hoax.'

'But, good heavens, sir, that means somebody in Mr. Heatherdale's own household!' I exclaimed. 'Nobody else could have put the first warning in the pocket of Mr. Austin Heatherdale's clothes. Surely—'

The Professor held up a warning hand. 'We have no right to make any such assumption, at least until we have subjected that theory to

the test of fact,' he replied. 'Now observe, that theory depends upon the first warning having been written after Mr. Austin Heatherdale's death. Let us again consider the matter, this time on the assumption that the warning was written and received by Mr. Austin Heatherdale before his death. In this case the warning was apparently justified; Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body was found in the place mentioned in the warning.

'Was the warning sent by someone who knew the fate hanging over Mr. Austin Heatherdale's head? We must admit the possibility that it was. But if so, it is remarkable that the second warning was worded in exactly the same terms. The first warning failed in its purpose, and Mr. Heatherdale was murdered. Is it not at least reasonable to suppose that a person, genuinely interested in warning Mr. Gerald Heatherdale against a similar fate to that which overtook his brother, and aware of the insufficiency of his first warning, would not have adopted some different method of expression? I think that you will admit that it is.'

'I do admit it, sir,' I replied eagerly. 'I have always thought that if the warnings were genuine, they were curiously inexplicit.'

'Quite so,' agreed the Professor. 'Personally, I have never been convinced of their genuineness, which is one of the factors inclining me to the hoax theory. But we were still bound to formulate a theory which will fit in with the supposition that Mr. Austin Heatherdale did actually receive the first message before his death. If we eliminate the likelihood of its having been sent by someone anxious to warn him of his danger, we must suppose it to have been concerned in the murder itself.

'Now this brings us to a very interesting point. Why should a person meditating murder go to the trouble of warning his intended victim, and even of designating a particular locality? I think that the answer to this question will be found in a comparison of the psychology of the two brothers. Mr. Austin Heatherdale, so far as he has been described to us, was a careless, bluff sort of person, quite certain of his ability to take care of himself. He has been described as obstinate, and even perhaps as somewhat overbearing.

We can imagine how such a man would regard an anonymous message such as this. He had probably no personal enemies, or at any rate none who would go to the lengths of actual violence. He might put the warning in his pocket, regarding it as a joke, but he would certainly not refrain from frequenting the locality mentioned. "Keep away from Horn's Lane." Nonsense! He would either put the paper in his pocket and forget all about it, or he would take a delight in walking along Horn's Lane to see what would happen, or even out of pure bravado.'

The Professor paused, and I could see by his expression that he was thinking deeply. We walked along the narrow road in silence. The downs were much nearer now; indeed, we were beginning to climb their lower slopes. The hedges bordering the road were low and stunted, telling of the powerful winds which blew from the south-west over this bare and exposed tract of country. Behind us the tower of Allingford Church rose above the leafless trees, and beyond it again, in the valley, I could see the brilliant white steam of a distant train glimmering in the winter sunshine.

'In this case, whoever sent the warning must have known Mr. Austin Heatherdale at least as well as we do,' continued the Professor abruptly. 'He must have seen the effect it would have upon him. Perhaps in this we may find the reason for the sending of the warning. It may be that his purpose was to draw Mr. Austin Heatherdale to the spot where his body was found.'

'He was certainly murdered in Horn's Lane, the place mentioned,' I ventured.

The Professor shook his head impatiently. 'How do you know?' he enquired. 'The finding of a man's body in a particular spot is no proof that he died there. Now, assuming that the second warning emanates from the same source as the first, we have an entirely different set of conditions to deal with. In the first place, the original warning has now acquired a new importance; new, that is to say, since Mr. Austin Heatherdale's death, since it was apparently justified. In the second place, the recipient is a very different person from his brother; indeed, their natures seem to be in almost complete

contrast. Mr. Gerald Heatherdale is a highly-strung, neurotic type. You have seen for yourself how greatly the receipt of this warning has affected him, and how literally he has interpreted it. It is impossible to imagine him consenting to go anywhere near Hilton Pennings, under any circumstances whatever. This again must have been foreseen by the author of the warnings. If the object of the first was to attract Mr. Austin Heatherdale to Horn's Lane, the object of the second must be equally certainly to ensure that Mr. Gerald Heatherdale should never by any chance visit Hilton Pennings.'

Again the Professor paused and I took advantage of his silence to make a point which already struck me.

'There seems to be no obvious reason why he should, sir. In the case of Mr. Austin Heatherdale, we are told that Horn's Lane was a short cut between his house and the station. Hilton Pennings, if that really is the name of the trees ahead of us, seems to be about as remote as it could possibly be. I don't know where the road goes to, but it appears to be very little used.'

The Professor took the ordnance map from his pocket and handed it to me. 'That point had occurred to me,' he replied. 'Spread the map out, and let us see exactly where we are.'

I complied, and with the help of my watch and the sun oriented the sheet on the grass by the roadside. After a few minutes' study of it I stood up and looked about me.

'That's Hilton Pennings all right, sir, whatever the old chap chooses to call it. You can see Allingford Church away among the trees. Beyond it again runs a canal; I noticed that we crossed a bridge of some sort last night in the car. Beyond the canal again I can make out the line of the railway, and I fancy I can see the roof of Pirton station. The high land in the distance is the edge of Salisbury Plain, you can see a bit of the old main road from Devizes to Salisbury and the flagstaffs marking the danger zone of the Artillery Ranges. The hill with the isolated building on it is called St. Ann's Hill, and the wireless masts—you can just see the top of them—are on Morgan's Hill.'

'Ah, very interesting, both as a lesson in topography and in

nomenclature,' said the Professor as my demonstration came to an end. 'In this part of the country, as indeed in most others, the local names do not always agree with the names on the map. I found in my room last night a book on local antiquities, which mentioned the annual fair held on August the sixth on Tan Hill. Tan is, doubtless, a corruption of St. Anne. For that matter, Allingford cannot have been the original name for the village. You could not have a ford on the lower slopes of a chalk down, there would be no river requiring such a thing. It was probably Allingfold at one time. As for Hilton Pennings, that name is obviously in a state of change. The word Pennings, applying to a small wood or coppice, is found, so far as I know, in Wiltshire alone.'

The Professor leant over the map for a moment. 'I fail to see why it was ever called Hilton Pennings,' he continued. 'Hilton appears to be a hamlet some five miles away, on the opposite slope of the downs. The road we are on, although marked on the map as a secondary road, appears, as you say, to be almost disused. It runs through Hilton Pennings, then over the downs to Hilton. I suppose the fact that the two places were on the same road, once of some local importance, determined the nomenclature of the wood. After Hilton, the road wanders across country to East Kennett, and so eventually reaches the main road from London to Bath. I agree with you, Harold, there seems to be no reason why Mr. Heatherdale should ever visit Hilton Pennings, unless he had business in Hilton village. There are shorter and better roads leading to East Kennett and the Bath road. This fact, taken into conjunction with the fact that our friend the countryman spoke of the wood as Marston's Copse, is significant.'

'In what way, sir?' I enquired. 'I could have understood it, if Hilton Pennings had lain between Mr. Heatherdale's house and either Pirton station, Devizes or Marlborough, all of which one might suppose him to have been in the habit of visiting. But out here, in the middle of the downs—'

'The significance lies in the light it throws on the author of the warning,' replied the Professor swiftly. 'Look at the map again. A

stranger to this part of the country, looking on the map for a road running from Ailing-ford to the Bath road, would naturally imagine that the one we are now on was the best and most frequented. If he wished to name a point on it, he would probably choose Hilton Pennings. But, as we have seen, a person with local knowledge would have used the name by which it is generally known, and written Marston's Copse. This is in itself an indication, though at present only a very slight one. Let us examine this wood.'

I folded up the map and we proceeded. The wood was only a few hundred yards distant, and we could perceive, as indeed the map had already shown us, that it consisted of a belt of trees, about a quarter of a mile long and a hundred yards or so wide, through which ran the road. We quickened our pace and were very soon under the shade of the trees.

'You observe another curious similarity between the two warnings,' said the Professor. 'Horn's Lane was described to us as being a disused roadway, passing through a small coppice. Here we have a road, not disused, certainly, but carrying very little traffic, also passing through a coppice. It is, you will observe, the only part of this road, so far as we can see, which is not completely exposed. It is, in fact, the very spot one would select in order to waylay anyone using the road. But to anyone used to reading maps, the ordnance survey would convey that information. It would not be necessary for him to visit the place. It does not follow that the person who wrote the second warning has been anywhere near here.'

'Although there seems very little traffic on the road now, it was evidently at one time of some importance,' I replied. 'The actual metalled surface is only about a dozen feet wide, but there is a strip of grass at least ten feet wide on either side, before you come to the ditch. It was obviously a high road once.'

'Yes, and its importance has survived in its representation as a second-class road on the map,' agreed the Professor. 'Let us walk to the far end of the Pennings.'

We did so, and a magnificent panorama of open down lay spread out before us. In the foreground, running like a serpent across the

green billows, ran the line of an ancient fortification, now clear and distinct as a wide ditch and parapet, now broken down and tumbled, a mere roughness on the smooth curve of the ground.

'Ah!' exclaimed the Professor. 'The Wansdyke, one of those unsolved problems bequeathed us by the past! Beyond it again, and slightly to our left, must lie Silbury Hill and Avebury, still filled with the glamour of the unknown. A most interesting county this, my boy, and one that some day I must investigate at my leisure. But we must not allow archaeological speculation to draw us from our present business. We had better turn back now. Mr. Heatherdale should be awake by this time.'

'What are you going to say to him, sir?' I enquired. 'I take it you will not explain the theories you have formed?'

'Certainly not,' replied the Professor decisively. 'Until those theories have been tested by facts, we must keep them strictly to ourselves. Yet I suppose I must tell Mr. Heatherdale something, if only to allay his fears.'

The Professor relapsed into silence, and we began to retrace our steps. The little village of Allingford lay below us, clear-cut in the frosty sunshine, the smoke of its chimneys ascending straight into the still air. It seemed ridiculous to believe that any mysterious fate could hang over the head of any dweller in so peaceful a spot. Yet I knew, from the Professor's manner, that he was far from reassured. 87

CHAPTER SIX

SS. BRACKENTHORPE MANOR

ON OUR return we found Mr. Heatherdale sitting in the study, looking very pale and worried, but in not quite the same state of nervous tension as on the previous evening. The Professor, without waiting to be questioned, plunged straight into the matter at once.

'I have come to the conclusion, Mr. Heatherdale, that our best course for the present will be to take no definite action, pending

further enquiries,' he said oracularly. 'Meanwhile I think it would be advisable if you were to come to London for a short period. You will, I am sure, feel safer in a great city than isolated in a small village. Besides, the enquiries that I propose to make must necessarily centre in London, whence the letter containing the warning was despatched, and it will naturally be more convenient if you are close at hand, in case reference to you becomes advisable. Do you agree to this course?'

A look of relief had spread over Mr. Heatherdale's face as the Professor spoke.

'I do, indeed,' he replied. 'In fact, I was about to propose some such arrangement myself. You will quite understand that I should never feel secure in this neighbourhood until this terrible threat is traced to its source. I am in the habit of paying short visits, three or four times a year, to a private hotel in Kensington, where I am well known. If you think it advisable, I could catch a train up to London this very afternoon.'

The Professor nodded approvingly. 'Harold and I will accompany you,' he said. 'But I would suggest that, for to-night at least, you become my guest. It will be as well not to proclaim your whereabouts too plainly, until we know more. I suggest that you inform your household that you are going up to London to stay with me, and that all communications are to be forwarded to you at my house in Westbourne Terrace. There will be no need to inform anybody when you proceed to your hotel, as I can arrange for your letters to be sent to you.'

'I am extremely obliged to you, Professor, and accept your invitation with the greatest pleasure,' replied Mr. Heatherdale. 'The only person who need know anything of my movements is Mrs. Milton. I shall, of course, require to communicate with her.'

'I should be inclined to use my note-paper for the purpose,' remarked the Professor carelessly. 'You can never tell into whose hands a letter may fall. The object of our little deception is to keep your whereabouts as secret as possible, and it seems a pity to run any risk of information falling into undesirable hands.'

Mr. Heatherdale looked somewhat surprised. 'There is very little risk of anything of the kind happening,' he said. 'But I will, of course, be guided by you in everything. Well, if we are to catch the 3.10 train this afternoon, I must give the necessary instructions. Will you excuse me?'

He bustled from the room, and the Professor grunted with annoyance.

'I fear that Mr. Heatherdale will be something of an encumbrance in London,' he said. 'But, frankly, I do not know what else to do with him. I do not want him here, that is quite certain. I shall have to make the best of it, I suppose.'

Then it was that the great idea came to me. 'Look here, sir!' I exclaimed. 'I think I know of a way of getting rid of him for a bit, that is, if it can be managed.'

'Indeed?' replied the Professor. 'I should be very glad to learn this idea of yours.'

'Why, there is one person in the world who is vitally interested in Mr. Heatherdale's safety,' I continued. 'The skipper of that vessel of which he is part owner—what's his name—Murchison. Why shouldn't Mr. Heatherdale go for a trip on the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, that is, if she is anywhere handy? Nobody could possibly do him any harm on board of her, and Murchison would take precious good care he didn't fall overboard, or anything silly like that. Upon my word, sir, I believe that's a topping scheme!'

The Professor sat silent for a few seconds, then his normally stern face relaxed into its nearest approach to a smile.

'Stripped of the exuberant language in which you have clothed it, I am inclined to agree that the course you suggest is worthy of consideration,' he replied. 'Whether it is feasible or not depends upon a number of circumstances. In the first place, would Mr. Heatherdale agree to it? I gather that his resentment of the obligation imposed upon him by his father's will to maintain the *Brackenthorpe Manor* is evinced by a definite hatred of that vessel, a hatred which probably extends to Captain Murchison and the sea generally. And even you would hardly advocate his forcible

abduction, I take it?'

'Oh, I fancy his objections could be got over, sir,' I said lightly. 'He's frightened enough to believe anything. If you were to hint that you could not guarantee his safety ashore—'

'I should probably frighten him into the grave, and so precipitate the tragedy,' interrupted the Professor. 'It is certainly true, if we admit that Mr. Heatherdale is really threatened, that he would be safer at sea in Captain Murchison's charge than anywhere else. It would also give us an excellent opportunity to make our investigations, which would be greatly facilitated if Mr. Heatherdale were out of the way. But even if we can secure his consent to this voyage, the second difficulty still remains. *The Brackenthorpe Manor* may be already at sea on some voyage that will not bring her back to this country for some considerable time.'

'Mr. Heatherdale will be well able to tell us that,' I said confidently. 'No doubt Murchison keeps him informed, as part owner, of the vessel's movements. If she is at sea, I agree that nothing can be done. If she is expected in a British port shortly, the suggestion is worth making.'

'I will consider the matter,' said the Professor. The return of Mr. Heatherdale made further discussion impossible.

At lunch I tried to discover whether Mrs. Milton was glad or sorry at the proposed departure of her employer, but was unable to come to any definite conclusion. At the back of my mind was the idea that, if the hoax theory were correct, she must be the guiding spirit in it. Who else would have had access to Mr. Austin Heatherdale's clothes? Alternatively, if she had not actually inserted the warning, if it had actually been delivered to Mr. Austin Heatherdale before his death, she was one of the few people who knew of her employer's discovery of it. In spite of the Professor's warning, I was very much inclined to wonder how much Mrs. Milton knew- about the business.

But I could come to no definite conclusion from Mrs. Milton's manner. She was cheerful, completely at her ease, never once referred to the reason for Mr. Heatherdale's departure. She saw us off

in the village Ford, and stood on the doorstep until we disappeared beyond the drive gate. I determined to spend the next few days in making discreet enquiries as to the habits of this model housekeeper.

We reached London safely, and on our arrival at Westbourne Terrace I left Mr. Heatherdale and the Professor alone together. I was very anxious that my scheme for shipping our guest out of the way should mature, and I knew that the Professor was almost as keen upon it as I was. Although I was ignorant of the exact nature of the enquiries he was about to make, I could guess, from my knowledge of his methods, that he would find Mr. Heatherdale terribly in his way. Besides, he was, to some extent, responsible for him while he was in London. If anything happened to him there, it might be said that the Professor had suggested his journey. Far better that the onus of looking after him should be transferred to someone else, and that the Professor should be left with a free hand to investigate. And who better than the one person who had a real interest in his safety? For already my distrust of Mrs. Milton was growing.

It was not until after dinner that I learned the result. We were sitting in the study, and the Professor broached the subject abruptly.

'I have acquainted Mr. Heatherdale with the suggestion that he should undertake a short voyage on the *Brackenthorpe Manor*,' he said, turning to me. 'Mr. Heatherdale agrees that, under the circumstances, such a course would seem to be expedient. As it happens, that vessel is now lying in the Royal Albert Dock. Mr. Heatherdale heard from Captain Murchison to this effect a few days ago.'

Mr. Heatherdale fidgeted nervously. 'I dislike intensely the prospects of the discomforts of a sea-journey,' he said querulously. 'And as I explained to you a couple of months ago in this very room, I resent the clause in my father's will which ties me to the vessel or its captain. But I am compelled to admit that the course you have suggested promises me a refuge from the danger which threatens me. If only poor Austin had not been so foolhardy, he might be alive now. I suppose I must make the best of it, and subject myself to the unpleasantness of a short voyage. I trust that, by the time I return,

you will have brought the criminals to book, Professor.'

'I shall do everything possible to that end,' replied the Professor. 'Meanwhile, Harold, we have decided that it will be best for you to go to the docks and arrange matters with Captain Murchison. Mr. Heatherdale will give you a letter of introduction. You can go early to-morrow morning, and Mr. Heatherdale will await your return here.'

I was delighted with this commission. Anything connected with ships and the sea appeals to me very strongly, and ever since I had heard Mr. Heatherdale's story, I had been vastly intrigued with the *Brackenthorpe Manor* and her skipper. That queer clause in Sir Francis Heatherdale's will, binding his heirs to the fulfilment of his cherished experiment, struck me as the most romantic thing I had ever heard of. That participation in such a venture should be thrust upon such a poor creature as Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, seemed to me the cruellest stroke of fate. Had I been Sir Francis' heir, with similar means and opportunities, what a life would I not have made for myself out of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. I wanted to see her, to make the acquaintance of Captain Murchison, fighting his battle with such grudging support. And now the chance had fallen into my hands.

I started very early next morning, and enjoyed every minute of my journey on the 'bus to Blackwall. The policeman at the dock gate directed me to the berth at which the *Brackenthorpe Manor* was lying, and turning the corner of a towering warehouse, I came suddenly upon her. Her stern towered above me, the words '*Brackenthorpe Manor, London*' boldly inscribed upon it.

I walked along the wharf, dodging cranes and slings laden with merchandise, with no eyes but for the vessel which had so filled my imagination. To my landsman's skill she was very much like any other cargo boat of her size; two short stumpy masts surrounded by derricks like the ribs of an inverted umbrella, a fat, black-painted funnel, round which was clustered the accommodation for her officers, wide hatchways, and high poop and fo'c'sle. She was kept like a liner; her paintwork, though obviously not new, was cleanly

scrubbed, here and there well-polished brass-work sparkled upon her decks. It struck me at once that, however much Mr. Heatherdale, the son of the man who conceived her, might hate this splendid legacy, the man who ran her loved her, despite the responsibilities she brought him. And I knew that I should like Captain Murchison.

I stared at the vessel for a few minutes in silence, then approached the gangway and asked for the captain.

'He's in his cabin, sir,' said a seaman cheerfully. 'If you'll wait a minute I'll show you the way.'

'Oh, that's all right,' I replied. 'I've got a letter for him from Mr. Heatherdale. I'll find my way.'

I knew enough about naval architecture to find the captain's cabin. As I climbed the ladder from the main deck I noticed that everything aboard the *Brackenthorpe Manor* was on a generous scale. Sir Francis had been no niggard in the building and equipment of this child of his old age. Everything about her showed evidence of loving care, of the desire to make of her the finest cargo boat of her tonnage afloat. I wondered whether even Mr. Heatherdale, after a voyage in her, could still find it in his heart to resent her very existence.

I came to a varnished door, upon which was a bright brass plate labelled 'Captain,' and knocked confidently. A powerful voice from within shouted 'Come in!' I turned the handle and stepped in, and there before me, sitting writing at a massive desk, was Captain Murchison.

I suppose it very rarely happens that the first sight of any individual of whom one has often drawn mental pictures coincides with the idea of him that one has formed. But it seemed to me somehow as though I had known Captain Murchison all my life. There he was, big; burly, red-faced, his cap tilted well back, showing a mass of iron-grey hair, exactly as I had imagined him. He looked up from his writing, and fixed me with a pair of blue eyes, almost startling in the seriousness of their glance.

'Well, what can I do for you?' he said gruffly, but not discourteously.

'I have a letter for you from Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, Captain

Murchison,' I replied, handing it to him as I spoke.

I fancied that a slight shade of annoyance passed across his face at the mention of Mr. Heatherdale's name. However, he took the letter from me and tore it open eagerly enough.

'Sit down while I have a look at it,' he said. 'Hullo! It doesn't take long to read. "Dear Captain Murchison, this is to introduce the bearer, Mr. Harold Merefield, who has a most important communication to make to you on my behalf." I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Merefield. You'll find a box of cigars in that locker by your right hand. They haven't paid duty and, to my mind, smoke all the better for that. Now, then, let us hear this important communication.'

The Professor had prepared me for this. 'You will have to decide for yourself how much it is expedient to tell this Captain Murchison,' he had counselled me. 'He will, of course, hear the whole story with embroideries from Mr. Heatherdale within a few hours of their meeting. But whatever you tell him, confine yourself to facts. Do not be tempted to stray into paths of useless speculation.'

Bearing this advice in mind, I resolved to begin at the beginning. I did not want this man, who I felt instinctively could be very useful to us, to get a garbled idea of the situation from Mr. Heatherdale.

'I'd better explain who I am first,' I replied. 'I am representing Dr. Priestley, an old acquaintance of Sir Francis Heatherdale, who was consulted by Mr. Gerald Heatherdale a couple of months or so ago.'

'Dr. Priestley?' interrupted Captain Murchison. 'Isn't he a mathematician, or something of the kind? I remember, shortly before his death, Sir Francis gave me a pamphlet written by a friend of his. "Here's something in your line, Murchison," he said. You'll find it on that shelf behind you. "A Note on the Methods of Discovering the Position of Ships at Sea" it is called. It's far above my head, but it seems to prove that the whole science of navigation is based upon error.'

I smiled. 'I don't know the work, but I haven't a doubt it's by the same man,' I replied. 'Dr. Priestley's hobby is the search for facts, and he is apt to attack any theory which is based upon false premises.'

It was because of this gift for unearthing facts that Mr. Heatherdale came to see him.'

I told the story of Mr. Heatherdale's visit to us much as I have told it here. When I had finished, Captain Murchison smoked his cigar for a few minutes in silence.

'That's a queer story about the warning poor Mr. Austin received,' he said at last, slowly. 'I have always thought there was more mystery about his death than the police would admit. Though who could have had a grudge against him I never could understand. He was a good fellow in spite of his rather quick temper. A better man than his brother, by a long way. I suppose Mr. Gerald told you about the conditions under which the three of us owned this vessel?'

'He did,' I replied. 'And I must say he did not seem very enthusiastic over his share of her.'

Captain Murchison laughed shortly. 'Enthusiastic!' he repeated. 'Why, he'd do almost anything, except spend money, to be rid of her and me and all connected with us. Mr. Austin was bad enough, I could never get him to take any real interest in the vessel. "That's all right, Murchison. You do as you think best," he would say, and Mr. Gerald in his turn left everything to him. Still, when Mr. Austin was alive, I could count upon as much financial support as I cared to ask for. And I assure you, Mr. Merefield, to run a vessel as we are bound to run the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, money has to be found at times.'

'I suppose Sir Francis Heatherdale's experiment is hardly a profitable one?' I ventured.

'Oh, the old girl pays her way, at present,' replied Captain Murchison. 'The trouble will begin in a few years' time, when she gets older and her maintenance charges begin to rise. Then Mr. Gerald will have to put his hand in his pocket a bit deeper than he has yet, and he won't like it. And, of course, I should be in a devil of a hole if anything happened to Mr. Gerald. I should become sole owner of the vessel, with the alternative of losing all my savings on keeping her running, or forfeiting both my job and my legacy if I sold her or laid her up. But then, of course, Sir Francis could not expect both his sons,

some years younger than I am, to die before me. "I've provided for you in my will, Murchison," he said to me, on the very day I took over the *Brackenthorpe Manor* for her trial run. The old man had come on board to spend the day, while we messed up and down the measured mile on the Clyde. It was the last time he was afloat, poor old chap. "I've provided for you in my will. You've no cause to worry, whatever happens to me."

'Of course, I didn't know what he meant. It wasn't until I got a letter from Mr. Withers, telling me of the old man's death and enclosing a copy of the will, that I understood. Then I realised the idea. The *Brackenthorpe Manor* was to justify his trust in her, and at the same time to be a means of livelihood to me, and to provide something for my old age if I lived longer than the twenty years. And, by God, I'll carry out the contract in the spirit of the old man's wishes, whatever his sons may think!'

Captain Murchison thumped the desk with his powerful fist, till the pen that lay upon it leapt again. Then he turned to me.

'But I don't suppose this interests you,' he said with a smile. 'I'm afraid I'm wasting your time. Have another cigar. I haven't given you the chance of telling me what this important communication is, yet.'

'You said just now that you would be in a hole if anything happened to Mr. Gerald,' I replied. 'It's just that possibility I've come to see you about.'

'Is anything the matter with him?' said Captain Murchison swiftly.

'At present he's all right, or he was a couple of hours ago,' I replied. 'The trouble is that he's received a warning exactly the same as his brother's.'

'What!' exclaimed Captain Murchison. 'Received a warning! What the devil do you mean?'

I told the skipper the story of the telegram, and how the Professor and I went down to Allingford in response to it. Then I described the letter Mr. Gerald had shown us, and explained that, as the spot mentioned was in the Allingford district, the Professor had thought it best to bring him up to London. When I had finished, Captain Murchison heaved a very obvious sigh of relief.

'If that's the only danger threatening Mr. Gerald, I'm not inclined to worry much,' he said with a smile. 'Must be a practical joke of some kind. You or this Inspector Hanslet you speak of will find it out sooner or later. I was afraid you were going to tell me he was dying of some incurable disease. Well, what do you want me to do about it?'

The whole bearing of the man radiated such practical common sense that I laughed in my turn.

'You know Mr. Gerald better than I do,' I replied. 'You can imagine the effect this has had upon his nerves. Dr. Priestley has his suspicions of where this warning came from, and he wants to look into the matter. To do this, he feels it would be better for Mr. Gerald to be out of the way for a bit. What safer or more natural refuge could he have than the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. The reason I came to see you was to fix up a cruise for him.'

Captain Murchison roared with laughter over this. 'Well, I'm damned everlastingly!' he exclaimed. 'And Mr. Gerald agreed to this? He must be pretty badly frightened, I must say. That's how you two persuaded him, I'll be bound. Told him he wasn't safe on shore after this warning and his brother's death, I suppose?'

'Well, something of the kind,' I admitted. 'But you'll arrange it, won't you?'

'Oh, I'll arrange it, right enough,' replied Captain Murchison. 'He's a perfect right on board the vessel, for that matter, as part owner. As it happens, it fits in very well, just now. I've got a mixed cargo from London and Avonmouth to the Mediterranean ports, and that ought to be a very pleasant trip for him at this time of year. I'll make him comfortable enough. Sir Francis built better accommodation on this boat than I ever saw on a vessel of her class. I'll ship an extra steward, and Mr. Gerald can live like a prince; that'll be all right. I don't know that I relish the idea of his company for a couple of months, but perhaps he'll take a little more interest in the *Brackenthorpe Manor* in future.'

Captain Murchison paused, opened a drawer of his desk, and drew out a large sheet of notepaper. I noticed that it was headed 'ss.

Brackenthorpe Manor' and bore the vessel's house flag in colours.

"I'll give you a note for him," he said, writing in a neat legible hand as he spoke. 'The best plan will be for him to join the ship at Avonmouth in a few days' time. He won't want to lie in the docks while we're loading, and I must have a chance to get his cabin ready for him. Where's he staying, by the way?'

'He spoke of a private hotel in Kensington, but you can always get hold of him by writing to the Professor's house,' I replied. 'I'll write the address down for you.'

'Thanks,' replied the skipper. 'I think I've got the address of that hotel of his. I've written to him there before. Still, I'll have Dr. Priestley's address, in case of accidents.'

He finished his note, put it in an envelope and gave it to me. 'Tell Mr. Gerald that I fully sympathise with him,' he said with a twinkle, 'and that I'll have everything ready for him when he joins the ship. I'll let him know in three or four days when to come along. I can't say yet how long we will be in getting the cargo on board.'

I rose to go. "I'm awfully obliged to you, Captain Murchison," I said. 'I thought you would understand.'

'Oh, I understand right enough,' he replied, with a laugh. 'I am to be responsible for Mr. Gerald while you ferret out this business. Well, good luck to you, and if you find out something about Mr. Austin's death, I shan't be surprised. I've always fancied there was more in it than met the eye.'

He held out a powerful, but shapely hand, and stood up as he did so. For the first time I realised the proportions of the man. He stood some six foot, and was broad and deep-set in proportion. I find that I am above the average build and height myself, but I felt a dwarf beside this bluff giant.

'I'm very glad to have met you, Mr. Mere-field,' he said as we shook hands. 'If ever you feel like a sea-trip yourself, remember there's always a corner aboard the *Brackenthorpe Manor*.'

'By Jove, Captain, that's awfully good of you!' I exclaimed. "I'll hold you to that promise some day."

'I hope you will,' he replied heartily. 'So long for the present,

then.'

I landed from the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, made my way to the dock gates and caught a 'bus homeward to the Professor and lunch.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ON THE PENNINGS

I WAS lucky enough to find the Professor alone when I got back to Westbourne Terrace.

'I have persuaded Mr. Heatherdale to retire to the drawing-room,' he said, as I entered the study. 'I was anxious to hear the result of your interview with Captain Murchison for myself.'

'Well, sir, Captain Murchison agreed to our scheme all right,' I began. 'He struck me as a very good fellow. Keeps the *Brackenthorpe Manor* like a new pin, too. Old Heatherdale knew what he was about when he put him in charge of her.'

The Professor frowned. 'How often must I repeat that facts, not impressions, are what are required in a matter like this? Please give me an exact account of your experience and conversation. Should I desire to know what impression you formed, I will ask for that later.'

Duly chastened, I began my story. The Professor listened until I told him that Captain Murchison suggested that Mr. Heatherdale should join the ship at Avonmouth. Then he interrupted me with a gesture of irritation.

'Dear me! I had hoped that Captain Murchison would take Mr. Heatherdale off my hands at once,' he said. 'He has this morning expressed his intention of calling both on Mr. Withers and Inspector Hanslet as soon as possible. As it happens, I am particularly anxious to see both of them before he does. I do not want this investigation to be complicated at the start by a recital of his imaginings. But I suppose we can hardly expect Captain Murchison to burden himself with Mr. Heatherdale at a moment's notice.'

'I'm afraid the skipper does regard this proposed trip as a bit of a burden,' I replied. 'He didn't pretend to be delighted with the suggestion. As for Mr. Heatherdale, can't you persuade him to stop in his hotel till he hears from Captain Murchison? Tell him it isn't safe for him to go about alone, or something like that.'

The Professor's face relaxed slightly. 'It may be necessary to make such a suggestion to him,' he said. 'Frankly, the man in his present frame of mind is a nuisance. His presence either in London or at Allingford is certain to hamper us. However, perhaps I may find a means of instituting my investigations before he sees these gentlemen. By the way, where did you tell Captain Murchison to communicate with him?'

'Here, sir,' I replied. 'I said that Mr. Heatherdale was going to a hotel in Kensington, but that letters would be forwarded to him from here. Murchison knew the place, he had written to him there before. I gather he always stops there when he comes up to London.'

'You seem to have been very outspoken to Captain Murchison,' said the Professor severely. 'Mr. Heatherdale may think it curious that he was allowed to know his whereabouts, since I insisted that Mrs. Milton was not to be informed. However, the harm is done, and we must console ourselves with the thought that Captain Murchison is not a woman, and is therefore unlikely to gossip. Now, have you anything more to tell me?'

'No, I think riot, sir,' I replied. 'I have a note from Captain Murchison for Mr. Heatherdale, which I fancy contains the suggestion that he should join the ship at Avon-mouth. The skipper will write or wire as soon as the vessel reaches that port.'

'Well, you seem to have executed your commission very satisfactorily, on the whole,' said the Professor. 'Now I want you to ascertain what facts you can at Allingford. I am anxious to know more about the life led by Mr. Heatherdale at Allingford House, with such particulars as you can gather about the household and the people he is acquainted with in the neighbourhood. You will have to be very cautious in seeking information, as it is most

important that no suspicion of any such enquiry should be raised. Your method of procedure you must decide upon the spot; but I would repeat my conviction that local taverns are very interesting centres for the exchange of news. I should not attempt any particular form of disguise, as such attempts usually form an excellent clue to recognition. You can confine yourself to avoiding places where you are likely to be known as the young man who spent the night at Allingford House.'

'I shall, of course, not stay in the village itself, sir,' I replied.

'No, I fancy Devizes will be your best centre,' agreed the Professor. 'Keep me informed of your daily movements, and of any facts which you may discover. I will send you any further instructions which my own investigations may render necessary. I have ascertained that there is a train to Devizes at 2.45, and I think it will be as well for you to catch it and begin your enquiries at once. We shall, of course, say nothing of your movements to Mr. Heatherdale. I will give him the letter from Captain Murchison.'

I left the house without seeing Mr. Heatherdale, and in due course caught the 2.45. On the journey down I tried to make something of the facts as we knew them, and to borrow the Professor's simile, to set up theories to bowl these facts at. My own idea was that these mysterious messages originated at Allingford, and from the very fact that the Professor had sent me back to that neighbourhood, I guessed that he shared my suspicions. Was it possible that my own first impression, that Mr. Gerald Heatherdale knew more about his brother's murder than he chose to confess, was correct, after all? This suggestion led to endless speculations. Mr. Gerald might have written both warnings himself, and produced these when he did in furtherance of some scheme of diverting suspicion from his complicity in his brother's murder. But there were two obvious objections to this theory. The first was that, so far as we knew, no suspicion against him had been aroused. The second was that it presupposed him to be a consummate actor. If ever a man had suffered from genuine and abject terror, then Mr. Heatherdale was that man.

But here a sudden thought struck me. Suppose Mr. Heatherdale's nervous terror was genuine, but was due, not to the so-called warning itself, but to the unknown circumstances which rendered the receipt of that warning necessary? Suppose that there was some imminent danger of suspicion being cast upon him, would that not account for his present state of mind? This was at least a possibility, and I resolved to make the suggestion to the Professor.

Such a train of thought led naturally to the subject of blackmail. If Mr. Heatherdale were indeed guilty, he must have had accomplices in his crime, and the most likely source from which suspicion could be cast upon him was these very accomplices. Perhaps one of them had sent him the warning, just as a reminder. . . . I was still resolving the almost endless possibilities of the case when the train drew into Devizes station.

I was not long in making the necessary dispositions. I took a room at the Bear, being careful to explain my interest in the antiquities of Wiltshire to the genial proprietor of that hostelry, and then arranged for the hire of a motor-bicycle for the week. The motor-bicycle idea had appealed to me from the first. It afforded a handy means of transport, and winter riding provided a spacious excuse for donning very different clothes to anything I usually wore. Breeches and gaiters, a well-worn leather coat, a peaked cap, and a generous pair of goggles, and I felt that I might scour the countryside without much fear of recognition.

I was sitting in the lounge of the Bear after dinner that very evening when I had my first stroke of luck. My host came up to me, followed by a tall, thin individual, whom he introduced as Mr. Quenton.

'Mr. Quenton lives in these parts, sir,' he said. 'He is the secretary of our local Antiquarian Society, and was very much interested to hear that you were interested in such things.'

'I am sure you will forgive me,' said Mr. Quenton pleasantly. 'If there is anything I can do to help you, I will be delighted.'

'It's awfully good of you,' I replied, rather taken aback. The prospect of a learned conversation with this expert upon a subject of

which I was appallingly ignorant had not entered into my calculations. 'Of course, I am ^a pure amateur, you know. I thought it would be a good way of spending a few days' leisure to explore the Wansdyke and Avebury and places like that.'

Mr. Quenton smiled. 'Well, you've given yourself a large enough field, anyhow,' he said. 'You'll probably find yourself at Hatton in the course of your wanderings; it's a village about three miles from here. If you should care to drop in and see me, anyone will show you my house. I've got a copy of Mottingham's *The Great Dyke* and one or two other things which might interest you. I'm nearly always about the place during the daytime. Good night.'

Mr. Quenton took his departure, and I resolved to take advantage of his invitation. Hatton, as I knew from the map I carried, was between Devizes and Allingford, a mere four miles from the latter. Mr. Quenton was certain to know something about the Heatherdale *menage*, and with any reasonable luck, I ought to find an opportunity for discreetly sounding him. But it would not do to be too precipitate.

The following day was Saturday, and I spent the hours of daylight in reconnoitering the country. I approached Hilton Pennings from the Bath road, along the road which the Professor had indicated on the map. My investigations confirmed what we had previously decided; that although it was in fair condition, narrow and grass-grown in places, but still quite passable, it was, over the greater portion of its length, almost unused. I made a very thorough investigation of the Pennings itself, but discovered nothing out of the ordinary. Finally, when it was quite dark and I fancied that the public-houses would be opening, I rode slowly down into Allingford.

The Chequers was obviously a place to be avoided. There was too much chance of being recognised by young Lawson the taciturn. As we had driven to Pirton station, I had noticed an unpretentious-looking little beer house, the Blue Boar. To this I made my way, and soon found myself in a long narrow tap room, with a magnificent fire of logs burning at one end of it.

The place was empty but for a couple of labourers, smoking contemplative pipes over their mugs of cider. I called for a pint of ale, and sat myself down on a bench among the shadows at the far end of the room from the fire. I had not been there many minutes before the door opened and three burly figures came in. By the light of an oil lamp which hung from a blackened beam of the ceiling I recognised one of them as Reuben, the head gardener at Allingford House.

Reuben was evidently a person of no small importance at the Blue Boar. The landlord himself bustled up and took a seat beside him. It appeared that Reuben had not been seen there lately. No doubt it had something to do with them queer goings-on at Allingford House? Someone had tried to murder Mr. Heatherdale in his bed, hadn't they? Mrs. Griggs, the postmistress, did say as how one of the girls came in in a terrible stew last Wednesday with a telegram to a gentleman in London all about it. The gentleman had come down in a hurry and Mr. Heatherdale had gone back to London with him. And wasn't it true that the house was full of detectives?

For all this gossip Reuben expressed a proper scorn. 'If you ask me, it was just one of the guv'nor's fancies,' he said. 'We all know what a nervous sort of a chap he is, and since that queer business about his brother last year he's been a sight worse. I could 'ave laughed in 'is face when he asks me to come and sleep in the house. Nothing never happened, as I knew it wouldn't. I wouldn't have minded, though, if it hadn't been for that there woman.'

This naturally produced a sympathetic murmur. 'She gingered you up proper, Reuben, I lay,' ventured one of the audience.

It appeared that she had. The exact cause of Reuben's discomfiture I could not quite grasp, but it seemed to be connected with the smoking of strong tobacco, with clods of mud found littered about the back premises, and with certain unseemly titterings in the servants' hall. Anyway, as soon as the guv'nor's back was turned, that adjective woman had bundled Reuben out of doors neck and crop. 'An' that after I'd been a blessed butler to them in my own time, too.'

Followed a general discussion upon the merits and demerits of the erring female, who was obviously Mrs. Milton. By the time that Reuben rose to go home to his supper, I had overheard a variety of opinions. Mrs. Milton, it was grudgingly conceded, knew her job all right. There was not much waste in *that* house. But all this efficiency merely covered a dark ulterior motive. She was after the gov'nor's money, of that there could be no doubt. She'd trick him into marrying her one of these days, we should see. If she couldn't, there were other means a clever woman could employ. Reuben affirmed that for his part he would not be the least surprised if this last scare was not due to some of her hanky-Panky. You never could tell with a woman like that. In fact, he would go so far as to say that she worked the whole thing, so as to get the gov'nor up to London for a bit. 'And who knows what little game she gets up to while he's away?'

I rode back to Devizes, feeling that my day had not been altogether wasted. I was quite well aware that I had obtained no direct evidence for or against Mrs. Milton. But, nevertheless, Reuben, as voicing local opinion, had been enlightening. How far this opinion fitted in with the facts of the case was not for me to determine.

When I got back to the Bear I found a letter from the Professor, written in his usual execrable hand. It was merely to tell me he had seen Mr. Withers and had a long talk with him. How this concerned me was not apparent until the last sentence: 'I understand from Mr. Withers, in the strictest confidence, that Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, in a will made shortly after his father's death, had bequeathed a considerable legacy to Mrs. Milton, also various small amounts to other members of his household.'

Well, the Professor had wasted no time, that was obvious. He must have seen Mr. Withers on the very afternoon I travelled to Devizes, while Mr. Heatherdale was settling himself in his hotel, no doubt. It was characteristic of him to give me the bare fact, without any instructions as to what use to put it to. It seemed to fit in fairly well with Reuben's opinion of the lady, as expressed in the Blue Boar. Was it possible that Mrs. Milton, taking advantage of the

circumstances of his brother's death, had instituted a campaign of terrorism of her employer? Was it possible to kill anybody through sheer fright? The Professor, I remembered, had suggested the possibility of such a thing. And certainly, Mr. Heatherdale was a very promising subject for such an experiment.

I wrote to the Professor, giving him a very full account of the conversation I had overheard in the Blue Boar. The next two or three days I spent roaming round the villages, exchanging a word with anyone who seemed disposed for conversation. In this way I learned that the staff at Allingford House consisted of four indoor and two outdoor servants, whose houses were all in the locality. Mr. Heatherdale appeared to lead a very retired life; a few of the neighbours called upon him at intervals, which calls he returned. He seemed to have no particular hobbies, beyond an interest in his garden, and in books, which came to him in batches from *The Times* Book Club. I could hear of no one who expressed any remarkable admiration or affection for him, but, on the other hand, I could hear of no one who bore him the slightest enmity.

During these days I made a point of visiting Hilton Pennings from time to time, but never saw a soul there besides myself. Occasionally a farm cart or a labourer on a bicycle would pass along the road leading through it, and once I saw a car, with a local index number, climb the hill and disappear in the direction of East Kennett. But of anything in the least degree menacing to Mr. Heatherdale or anybody else there was not a sign.

It was not until Wednesday morning that I met with any adventures worth recording. Then, on coming out of the Bear after breakfast to cross the square to the garage where I kept my motor-cycle, I recognised the Ford car from the Chequers at Allingford with young Lawson at the wheel. The car was standing in the middle of the market-place, and, as I watched, a boy came out of a shop and put a parcel into it.

I did not want to be recognised by young Lawson, so I steered a devious course to my destination, which led me through a narrow street, quaintly called 'The Little Brittox.' To my horror I saw,

looking carelessly into a shop window, the familiar figure of Mrs. Milton.

I dived into the first shop that came handy, which happened to be a pork butcher's. Unfortunately the place was empty, and I found myself standing like a fool before the counter, eyed expectantly by a couple of assistants. I managed to stammer out a request for a pound of sausages, and to waste as much time as possible fumbling in my pockets for the money to pay for them. By the time I emerged, Mrs. Milton had disappeared.

I made my way to the garage by the back streets, jumped on my machine, and left the town by a road which led in the opposite direction to Allingford. As to Mrs. Milton's movements I was not concerned; she had evidently hired the car to come in and do her weekly shopping. My only hope was that she had not seen me.

That afternoon I worked my way round to Hatton, determined to call upon Mr. Quenton. I found him at home, and apparently pleased to see me. I had read up all I could find about the antiquities of Wiltshire in the various local guide-books, and had the satisfaction of feeling that I did not too blatantly expose my ignorance. Mr. Quenton gave me tea, and after that meal my opportunity came.

'Do you know anything of this part of the world?' my host said casually.

'Very little,' I replied. 'Or, for that matter, anybody in it. I met a Mr. Heatherdale once, who lives somewhere in this direction, I believe.'

'Heatherdale? Yes, he lives in the next village,' replied Mr. Quenton. 'Queer fellow, lots of money, but no interest in life as far as I can make out.'

'Married?' I suggested.

'No, nor ever has been, as far as I can make out. He lives in a decent-sized house with a housekeeper to look after him. A tea-party now and then is about as much as he sees of society.'

'Housekeeper, eh?' I exclaimed. 'Sort of *menage a deux*, then?'

Mr. Quenton smiled. 'Oh, it's all perfectly square and above-board,' he replied. 'She's an old friend of the family, I believe,

Mrs. Milton by name. I don't know if she's a widow or what, but the existence of a Mr. Milton has never been mentioned, to my knowledge. She's been with him a good many years now, ever since he's been in this part of the country, in fact. Waits on him hand and foot, but in return does pretty well as she pleases. The house is as good as hers; all Heatherdale asks is to be made comfortable and left alone. By the way, there was an absurd rumour the other day that someone had threatened to murder him, or something of the kind.'

'Murder him?' I repeated. 'Why, hadn't he a brother who was murdered?'

'Yes, rather more than a year ago, in Essex somewhere. Heatherdale was staying with him "at the time, and came back here full of the story. I really believe he enjoyed telling us the details and the important part he played in the matter. I fancy it must have got on his brain a bit, he was always a queer sort offish, and now, I suppose, he has got it into his head that the same sort of thing is going to happen to him. I'm quite sure nobody would go to the trouble of murdering Gerald Heatherdale. He strikes me as being much too insignificant a sort of person.'

We chatted for a short time longer, and then I took my departure and went back to the Bear for dinner.

I finished dinner soon after eight o'clock, and found myself wondering how I should spend the evening. It was a glorious night, with a full moon shining in a cloudless sky, and a cheerful sparkle of frost in the air. A sudden whim seized me, and I determined to go and have a look at Hilton Pennings once more. It would be something to do, and I imagined that the views over the downs and the valleys would be worth seeing. I always fancied an air of mystery hanging over the downs; perhaps the evidences they bore of long-past ages appealed to my imagination. At all events, I got out my motor-cycle once more, and in half an hour I was climbing up the hill out of Allingford towards the clump of trees, still and silent beneath the moon.

If I had found the spot a lonely one by daylight, it was a thousand times more so by night. As I stopped my machine in the road in the

deep shadow of the trees, it seemed to me as though I must be the sole inhabitant of a long-dead world. Not a breath stirred the branches above me, nothing moved upon the silent downs, even from the valley beneath came no sign of life. For a long time I stood watching, fascinated by the stillness, straining my ears for the least rustle of grass, my eyes for a twinkling light in the direction of the village beneath me. And for a long time I heard and saw nothing; I might have been alone in this vast tract of rolling down and silent valley.

Then at last I saw a faint gleam come and go somewhere among the wooded land at my feet. No doubt the reflection of the headlights of some car far away. I watched it as it flickered and noticed that it was growing brighter and more continuous. I fancied that every now and then I could hear the faintest throb of an engine. Suddenly the gleam of light drew clear of the trees and resolved itself into two bright pin-points. The sound of the engine became unmistakable, and I realised that the car was coming towards me, along the road that led through the Pennings.

This was only the second car I had seen using the road, and I determined to wait and see what it looked like. I felt a vague resentment against it for disturbing the peace of the night. I drew my machine to the edge of the grass and watched as the car drew nearer.

Of course, I could make out nothing of it; the headlights were facing straight in my eyes, bright and dazzling. The car was climbing the hill at a great pace, it seemed to me, but I reflected that speed was very difficult to judge at night. I shaded my eyes with my hand, hoping to catch a glimpse of the car as it passed. Then, when it was only a few yards away, I suddenly realised with a thrill of horror that it was coming straight for me.

I let go of my machine and jumped. Even as I did so, I felt the car rush by me, not an inch, it seemed, from my back. My foot caught in the rough grass by the side of the road, and I stumbled heavily. By the time I had recovered my balance and turned round, all I could see of the car was a faint red spot where its tail lamp was.

I was considerably shaken and very angry. One does not expect to

be deliberately run down by a fool motorist on a lonely country road. My first thought was for my motorcycle. It was lying on its side on the ground, none the better for its fall, but luckily the idiot had managed not to run over it. I tried to start it, with some idea of chasing the car and taking its number, but the fall had interfered in some way with its inward parts. The only thing to do was to prop it on its stand and run to the far end of the Pennings in the hope of catching sight of the car. I just managed to catch a glimpse of it as it turned the shoulder of the downs. In the uncertain moonlight it looked like an enclosed saloon of some kind.

Vowing vengeance against the malefactor, I returned to my machine, and after several minutes of hard work got it to fire once more. But far too much time had been wasted to make pursuit possible. The fellow was probably on the Bath road by now and in any case was impossible to identify. The peace of the night was shattered for me; I turned back down the hill towards Devizes and bed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY

WHEN I got back to the Bear, I was handed a telegram, which had arrived just after I had left. It was from the Professor: 'Meet me with a car ten-twenty Devizes station to-morrow morning Thursday Priestley.'

So the Professor's trail led down in this direction, I conjectured. I wondered what the matter was which had brought him down so suddenly. A timetable hung in the hall, and from it I discovered that the train which arrived at ten-twenty left Paddington at the unearthly hour of seven-fifteen. To induce the Professor to make such an early start on a winter morning, something unexpected must have happened.

However, it was no use guessing. I smiled as I remembered the Professor's mistrust of telegrams—he never sent them if he could

possibly help it, on the grounds that anyone could personate the sender. However, at the time that this one was handed in the country post would have been closed, and a letter could not have reached me until too late. Besides, the office of origin was Leinster Place, a few doors away from the Professor's house, where he and his household were all well known. I made up my mind that I could safely act upon it.

Early next morning I arranged for the hire of a car, and with it went to the station to meet the train, which arrived well up to time. From a first-class carriage emerged the Professor, followed by a tall figure which I recognised with a start of surprise. It was Inspector Hanslet.

'Well, my boy, we have come down to see how you are getting on,' said the Professor genially. 'Inspector Hanslet happened to be at leisure to-day, and I have persuaded him to visit this neighbourhood. We have discussed the case of Mr. Gerald Heatherdale's warning, and he has been good enough to take an interest in it.'

'I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Merefield,' said Inspector Hanslet. 'So you've been doing a bit of detective work on your own, have you? Slow business, isn't it? Things don't happen so quickly as the story-tellers make out.'

'Oh, I'm only an amateur, Inspector,' I replied. 'You can't expect me to ferret out much in a week. Still, I've picked up a few facts about these people.'

'Only an amateur, eh?' commented Inspector Hanslet. 'Well, you're learning in a pretty smart school, anyhow.'

We had reached the car by this time, and the Professor turned to Hanslet. 'Where would you like to begin, Inspector?' he said.

'Oh, let's have a look at the place the warning speaks of,' replied Hanslet. 'What's the name of it? Something Pennings.'

'Hilton Pennings,' I said. 'I've been there a good bit lately. In fact I was there as recently as last night, and nearly got run over for my pains. There's nothing much to be seen there.'

'I don't suppose there is,' replied Hanslet with a trace of a smile. 'Still, now I'm down here, I may as well see what there is to be

seen.'

I gave the necessary instructions to the driver, and the three of us climbed into the car, which started on its journey.

'I am afraid that Inspector Hanslet is of opinion that this matter is a mare's nest,' remarked the Professor good-humouredly. 'I had some little difficulty in persuading him to come with me at all. I think it was more the prospect of a day in the country than anything else which decided him.'

Inspector Hanslet laughed. 'I've too much respect for your acuteness, Professor, to imagine that you would trouble yourself with a mare's nest,' he replied. 'Still, it's all a bit vague, you'll admit. Looks as if somebody who knew the sort of fellow Mr. Heatherdale is was trying to pull his leg. But we needn't go into that again. I promised to come down here and tell you what's the best thing to do, and you've promised to explain your theories to me. Meanwhile, those downs alone are worth the journey to look at.'

The Professor smiled and turned to me.

'Did I understand you to say that you were nearly run over last night, Harold?' he enquired. 'Where did that happen?'

'Why, in the most unlikely spot in the world, sir,' I replied. 'In the middle of Hilton Pennings itself.'

'Indeed? From my observations of the spot I should have imagined that there never was sufficient traffic to make such an accident possible,' said the Professor.

'Perhaps Mr. Heatherdale's warning was really intended for you,' remarked Hanslet with a chuckle. 'Or perhaps some individual exists who makes a hobby of running over people at that spot, and a well-wisher of Mr. Heatherdale's wanted to warn him of it. What do you think, Professor?'

'All theories, until contradicted by fact, must be deemed to be within the realms of possibility,' replied the Professor oracularly.

'Describe the incident as minutely as you can, Harold.'

I described the happenings of the previous night as accurately as I could, explaining that I had no reason for visiting the Pennings beyond a vague desire to keep my eye on the place, and that nobody

could possibly have known that I was going there. The Inspector was the first to speak when I had concluded.

'There are far too many of these speed merchants on the road,' he said. 'Half the people who drive cars are not to be trusted with a perambulator. Drove straight at you, did he? Wasn't looking where he was going, I suppose. Had a drink or two to keep the cold out, very likely.'

'He must have been pretty blind in every sense,' I replied. 'For one thing, my bicycle lamp was shining down the road towards him, and for another, his own headlights were jolly powerful. They dazzled me so completely that I could see nothing of the car as it came towards me, in spite of the moon. But, hullo, this is Allingford, Inspector. You can see the roof of Allingford House among the trees there.'

'That's Mr. Heatherdale's place, is it?' said Hanslet. 'Well, perhaps we'll pay a call there later. I expect you'll find some excuse for us, Professor. I fancy that it would take more than an anonymous warning to drive me out of a spot like that.'

'You must make allowances for the fact that his brother died under circumstances which have not yet been explained,' remarked the Professor quietly.

Hanslet made a wry face. 'You'll have that against me till we lay that gang by the heels,' he replied. 'Not that there can be any real connection between Mr. Austin Heatherdale's death and this precious warning. Fellows like the murderers of Mr. Austin don't work on these lines at all. Still, I can understand that Mr. Gerald, who's a nervous sort of a chap in any case, would jump to the conclusion that it was his turn next. If I hadn't seen this warning I should have said that he'd imagined the whole thing. Perhaps he will be in a more reasonable frame of mind when he comes back from his sea trip. When does he start, by the way, Professor?'

'I saw Mr. Heatherdale yesterday morning,' said the Professor. 'He informed me that he had heard from Captain Murchison, who asked him to send his heavy baggage in advance to Avonmouth, and to expect a telegram from him on Wednesday or Thursday, that is, yesterday or to-day. It is possible that Mr. Heatherdale is already on

board the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. Ah, we have arrived at Hilton Pennings, I see.'

The car stopped and we got out. A cold wind was blowing from the northward, driving brilliantly white fleecy clouds across the blue sky. Smoke rose from the villages lying in the valley at our feet, but of life of any kind on the downs there was no trace, save for a flock of sheep in the distance, the tinkling of whose bells came faintly to us on the breeze.

'Lonely spot,' commented Hanslet. 'Hardly the sort of place one would expect Mr. Heatherdale to frequent at this time of year. I imagine a warning to keep away from it would be quite superfluous. Doesn't seem to be anybody about at all.'

I had walked a few yards along the road, towards the spot where I had stood the previous night. 'Hullo!' I said. 'You can see the tracks of that fellow who nearly ran over me. He swerved right off the road on to the grass. Look here!'

The Professor and Hanslet joined me. 'You were standing on the left side of the road as he approached you,' remarked the former. 'It is possible that the lamp of your motor-cycle dazzled him, and he imagined that you were coming towards him on your own left-hand side. He would then swing to his left, following the rule of the road, and that would account for his driving over the grass. You will observe that he regained the road after a few yards.'

This aspect of the matter had not occurred to me. 'Possibly, sir,' I replied doubtfully. 'But I had the idea that he was driving straight at me.'

'He had to' remarked Hanslet. 'It must have seemed to him that you were coming towards him on the wrong side of the road. He would not dare to pass you on his wrong side, in case you swerved across at the last moment. At all events, there was no harm done. Well, Professor, there isn't much more to see here. We may as well walk along to the end of the coppice, and then, I dare say, you can think of an excuse for us to call at Allingford House.'

But the Professor was gazing intently at the ditch, at a spot where the wheel-marks of the car approached it within a yard or two.

'Something bulky seems to have fallen on the grass here quite recently,' he said. 'Observe how the grass has been pressed down, Harold.'

Hanslet and I joined him. The ditch between the grass at the side of the road and the trunks of the beech trees was deep and overgrown. In fact, the ditch itself was entirely hidden; its existence would never have been suspected, except in the one place where the Professor was looking. There, where the tracks of the car approached the ditch most nearly, the overhanging grass was bent and broken, and the sides of the ditch were clearly visible.

Hanslet stepped up to the edge and glanced in. 'Good Lord!' he exclaimed. 'There's a man lying there!'

As he spoke he leapt into the ditch. The Professor and I ran forward. There, lying huddled up on his face, was the figure of a man, fully dressed and wearing a thick, earth-stained overcoat.

Hanslet bent down, and with an effort raised the man until he could see his features. He gazed full in the soiled face for several seconds, then gently lowered the body again. Without a word he climbed out of the ditch and faced us; grim, determined, a very different man from the genial companion of our morning drive.

'Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, dead, and frozen stiff!' he said, quietly.

CHAPTER NINE

SUSPICION

THE Professor and I were too horrified at the discovery to do more than stare incredulously. Hanslet, however, confronted with a situation thoroughly in his own line, was completely master of himself.

'Thank goodness, I found him before any meddling fool came along to disturb these tracks,' he continued. 'I will ask you to step back into the road, please. You will understand, of course, Professor, that from this moment I take charge of the case.'

He left us abruptly and walked up to the waiting car. 'Get down into the village as sharp as you can,' we heard him say to the driver. 'Find the constable and doctor and bring them back here. Tell them that Inspector Hanslet of Scotland Yard wants them at once. And for

goodness sake keep your mouth shut.'

The man set off on his errand, and Hanslet came back to us. He looked askance at me, I thought, as he spoke.

'You seem to make a hobby of getting into suspicious situations, Mr. Merefield,' he said grimly. 'How do you account for Mr. Heatherdale's body being here?'

I was still too dazed by the discovery to reply coherently. The fact of Mr. Heatherdale being found dead in the very spot mentioned in the warning was so grotesque, so utterly incredible, that I felt the whole scene must be some terrible nightmare, that I should wake up suddenly in my bed in the Bear.

'I—I don't know,' I said. 'He must have fallen out of the car. I was too flustered to see anything till it was well past me. I can't imagine.

...

Hanslet shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, we'll hear what you've got to say at the inquest,' he said. 'It strikes me, Professor, that you and I have made a bit of a mess of this business.'

'I admit that I have allowed myself to be entirely misled as to the gravity of the danger menacing Mr. Heatherdale,' replied the Professor. 'I shall always feel to a certain degree responsible for his death. But now that you have taken charge of this case, the most I can do is to hold myself at your disposal as a witness.'

Hanslet looked at him sharply. 'I'm not sure that you can't be of more use to us than that,' he said in a more conciliatory tone. 'It wouldn't be the first time I've benefited by your advice, Professor.'

But the Professor shook his head firmly. 'You know my methods, Inspector Hanslet,' he replied. 'My sole function is to deduce the truth by comparison of facts. I am not a detective, but a mathematician. I am not prepared to act in an advisory capacity in this matter. The police, in my opinion, are not sufficiently trained in the recognition of pure facts as such to make it possible for me to accept their premises as a basis for my deductions. If I am to assist in the elucidation of the circumstances surrounding Mr. Gerald Heatherdale's death, I must be allowed to work in my own way.'

Hanslet frowned, then smiled sourly. 'Of course, I can't bring

any pressure to bear upon you, Professor,' he said. 'I would at least request you not to interfere with my investigations until after the inquest, at which I shall require the attendance of you and Mr. Mere-field. I fancy the matter will be cleared up by then.'

'I will certainly give you the undertaking you require, Inspector,' replied the Professor. 'I imagine that you will have no objection to Harold and myself returning to London until you require our presence at the inquest?'

Hanslet hesitated for a second. 'No, I think there's no objection,' he replied rather doubtfully. 'I take it that I can rely upon you to produce Mr. Merefield when necessary? You will understand his importance as a witness.'

'I will guarantee that he shall be at your disposal,' said the Professor.

Hanslet nodded, and we relapsed into a rather strained silence, until the purr of an engine announced the return of the car.

The Professor drew me aside as Hanslet hurried forward to meet the doctor and the constable.

'We can watch proceedings from here without intruding ourselves upon Inspector Hans-let,' he said quietly. 'He is naturally somewhat perturbed at the line events have taken. It will be as well not to disturb him.'

The doctor and the constable, after a curious glance in our direction, hastened to the spot where the body was lying. After a few minutes' inspection, the doctor rose to his feet.

'It's Mr. Gerald Heatherdale right enough,' we heard him say. 'He's been dead some hours, I should imagine.'

'What did he die of?' snapped Hanslet.

'Well, for one thing, his neck is broken, to use the popular term,' replied the doctor cautiously. 'What other injuries, internal or external, he may have suffered I am not yet prepared to say. An exhaustive post-mortem will, of course, be necessary.'

'We will have him removed very soon,' said Hanslet. 'But I want to have a good look round this place first. You, constable, what's your name?'

'Grainger, sir,' replied the constable, who was obviously dazed by the discovery of the corpse and the presence of one of the great ones of Scotland Yard. Hanslet tore a page from his pocket book and scribbled a few words upon it. 'Take this wire to the nearest post-office and send it off,' he commanded. Then a sudden thought struck him and he hurried over to us.

'Grainger is going into the village to send a telegram for me,' he said. 'If you are going back to London, Professor, you may as well take the car to Pirton station. Grainger can go with you. It is needless to ask you to say nothing about this business.'

The Professor smiled faintly. 'The matter of Mr. Heatherdale's death has for the present ceased to be any concern of mine,' he replied. 'I shall certainly do nothing to make it known. If you do not require our presence any longer, Harold and I will certainly take the next train back to London.'

We entered the car, closely shadowed by the taciturn Grainger, who seemed unable to keep his eyes off me. I remembered seeing him once or twice during my motor-cycling expeditions, and wondered if he recognised me. However, he said nothing during the journey, and having left us at Pirton station, returned in the car in the direction of the Pennings.

We ascertained that there was a train to London in half an hour or so, and then set to work to pace the platform. The Professor was obviously wrapt in thought, and I made no attempt to interrupt his meditations. Suddenly he turned to me.

'At what time was it that this car passed you last night?' he enquired sharply.

I made a mental calculation. 'About ten to a quarter past, as far as I can judge, sir,' I replied.

'Ah!' exclaimed the Professor. 'I do not think I shall be breaking the undertaking I gave Inspector Hanslet by asking a single question.'

He strolled up to a porter who was sweeping the platform outside the booking office.

'Were you on duty when the nine forty-two down train arrived

yesterday?' he enquired.

'I was, sir, taking the tickets,' replied the man.

'Did you notice whether Mr. Heatherdale came down by that train?'

'Mr. Heatherdale of Allingford House? I didn't notice, sir. There was a big crowd came in by that train yesterday. Cheap tickets was issued to Newbury for the Christmas market, and that was the train they mostly came back by. There was a couple of extra coaches on the train, and I had my work cut out to get all the tickets in. Mr. Heatherdale may have been among them; I wouldn't say he wasn't, but I don't recollect seeing him.'

'Do you happen to remember collecting any first-class tickets from London?' persisted the Professor.

'Oh, I dare say there was a round dozen of them,' replied the man. 'There mostly is, at this time of year, when the gentlefolk goes up to town to do their Christmas shopping.'

'Thank you,' said the Professor pleasantly, giving the man a shilling. 'It is of no consequence.'

We turned away and renewed our pacing of the platform.

'You observe how instructive that short conversation has proved,' he said, suddenly. 'The circumstances surrounding the finding of the bodies of Austin and of Gerald Heatherdale have much in common. In each case, the apparent facts would appear to indicate that the victim was murdered shortly after arriving at the station nearest his residence. In this case, I have been able, fortunately, to interrogate the most likely person to have seen Mr. Heatherdale alight from the train before the suggestion is made to him that he probably did so alight. You heard his replies. Inspector Hanslet is certain to question him in his turn, but by that time the fact that Mr. Gerald Heatherdale has been found murdered in Hilton Pennings will be public property. Hanslet will probably also enquire whether a closed car was awaiting the arrival of that train. It will be very interesting to compare the replies he receives with the information we have gained.'

'Shall we ever hear what those replies were, sir?' I enquired.

The Professor paused for a moment before replying. 'I do not care

to advance any theory at present,' he replied at last. 'I can only say that the ascertained facts point to this being a far more complicated case than Inspector Hanslet imagines. In the very likely event of his being unable to discover the murderer by the date of the inquest, I am at liberty to make my own investigations. And I am sure that in that case, when Hanslet has had time for mature reflection, he will place all the knowledge he has gained at my disposal.'

'I suppose there is no doubt that Mr. Heatherdale's body being found in the ditch where we saw it has some connection with the car that nearly ran over me?' I ventured to enquire. 'After all, the body may have been there before my arrival—I should not have seen it in the dark if it had been. On the other hand, it may have been placed there later in the night.'

'I repeat that I prefer not to enunciate any theory,' replied the Professor. 'There is nothing to prevent your doing so, however. How do you account for the presence of Mr. Heatherdale's body in the ditch at Hilton Pennings?'

'Well, sir, it looks very much as if he had intended to come to Allingford House, perhaps to pick up something he wanted before joining the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. He arrived at this station, by the same train, the nine forty-two, that we came down by the other day. A car was waiting for him with a gang of ruffians in it. As soon as they got him inside, they gagged him in some way, went through his pockets, then drove up the road through the Pennings. When they saw me there, they drove at me to occupy my attention, flung poor Mr. Heatherdale out, breaking his neck in the process, and drove off in the opposite direction. I can't think of any other explanation.'

'That will serve as our first set of ninepins,' replied the Professor. 'I am afraid that, upon consideration of the facts, we should be compelled to bowl several of them over. Ah, here is our train coming in.'

Our train turned out to be a slow one, and we did not reach Westbourne Terrace until after four o'clock. Mary, the parlourmaid, met us with a telegram, which had arrived during the morning. It was addressed 'Heatherdale Priestley Westbourne

Terrace London.'

The Professor took it eagerly and tore it open. 'I think we may assume from the address that it is intended for both Mr. Heatherdale and myself,' he remarked. 'Ah, yes, I thought so. From Captain Murchison, handed in at Avonmouth Dock at 8.10 this morning. "As explained, cannot delay sailing beyond noon to-day. If you not here then shall expect you Marseilles Murchison." That is very much what I expected.'

'You said that Mr. Heatherdale expected his summons yesterday or to-day, sir,' I replied. 'It looks from this wire as though he had had it, was obeying it, in fact, when he was murdered. I think this strengthens my idea that he decided to call at Allingford House on his way to Avonmouth, and that his murderers seized their opportunity. But the extraordinary coincidence that his body should be found at Hilton Pennings!'

The Professor was about to reply when Mary reappeared. 'Inspector Willart of Scotland Yard would like a word with you, if you can see him, sir,' she announced. Mary was by this time fully inured to the shock of queer visitors at Westbourne Terrace. A police officer more or less held no excitement for her.

'Show him in,' replied the Professor. Then, as an aside to me, 'Listen and watch carefully. This, no doubt, is Inspector Hanslet's first move.'

Inspector Willart entered, a short, wiry figure of a man, with a suggestion of humour in his eyes and a faint trace of banter in his voice.

'I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Dr. Priestley,' he began. 'We've all heard of you, but Hanslet's been the only one lucky enough to know you so far. Well, no doubt you can guess what I've come about. I had a trunk call from Hanslet a couple of hours ago, from some outlandish spot in Wiltshire. He told me you had just left him, and were coming up to town. It seems that you stumbled on a murder between you, but that's his business, not mine. He asked me to go round to the Cardinal Hotel in Cromwell

Road, and make enquiries there about a Mr. Gerald Heatherdale, and then to come to you and ask if you could supplement my information. And here I am.'

The Professor smiled austerely. 'I shall, of course, be happy to give you any information in my power, Inspector Willart,' he replied. 'But you will realise that I cannot supplement your information until I know what that information comprises. Perhaps you would like to sit down and inform me.'

Inspector Willart sank into a chair and began straight away. 'You will realise that I know nothing of this case whatever. I am only following Hanslet's instructions. I went to this place, the Cardinal Hotel, and found it to be a sort of glorified boarding-house. But, no doubt, you know it?'

'I visited Mr. Heatherdale there a few days ago,' replied the Professor.

'Then I needn't describe it any further. I got hold of the proprietress, a remarkably intelligent woman, and succeeded in convincing her that I was making enquiries in Mr. Heatherdale's interest. She told me all she knew about him at once. He was in the habit of staying at the Cardinal Hotel from time to time, and had done so for many years. Just a week ago he had arrived, saying that he proposed to stay for a few days before leaving England for an extended period. She said that she noticed at once that something was the matter with him, he was nervous and jumpy, and seemed anxious to say as little as possible about himself and his movements. She observed that all his letters were forwarded from another address in London, which she remembered and told me.'

'I presume it was this address?' remarked the Professor.

'It was. Well, yesterday, by the afternoon post, Mr. Heatherdale got a letter direct, the first she had seen. She noticed it particularly, as the flap of the envelope was embossed with a flag of some kind. He asked for his bill at once, and told her that circumstances had made it necessary for him to leave immediately. It was then about four o'clock. Mr. Heatherdale asked for a taxi, saying that he must catch a train at Paddington, and that he had some shopping to do first.

The taxi was summoned, Mr. Heatherdale and the two suit-cases he had brought with him were put into it, and that was the last she saw of him.'

'I suppose the lady knew nothing of the contents of the letter?' suggested the Professor.

'Nothing whatever. At my request, she sent for the waste-paper baskets from Mr. Heatherdale's room and the public rooms, but we found nothing like it in any of them. He had probably put it in his pocket or burnt it. But after his departure a telegram arrived for him, handed in at Bristol at 11.36 p.m. last night and delivered early this morning. This telegram I took charge of. Here it is.'

Inspector Willart took the folded paper from his pocket book and handed it to the Professor, who adjusted his glasses and read it aloud.

'Presume my letter miscarried must sail noon to-morrow if coming take train direct to Avonmouth Murchison.'

'Now, I know nothing of all this, but it looks a bit odd to me,' commented Inspector Willart. 'Was the letter from the same man who sent the wire? If so, as Mr. Heatherdale obviously obeyed the instructions it contained, why did he never arrive? Perhaps you can help me, Professor?'

Without a word the Professor handed him the telegram he had found on our arrival.

'Hullo, here's another!' exclaimed Inspector Willart. 'Addressed to him or you at this address, and signed by the same man, Murchison, whoever he might be. Practically the same as mine, too. But what's this about Marseilles?'

'There I think I can help you,' replied the Professor. 'Without entering into details, with which Inspector Hanslet is already fully acquainted, I may tell you that Mr. Heatherdale had arranged to take a voyage on board a vessel called the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, commanded by Captain Murchison. He was staying at the Cardinal Hotel awaiting instructions to join the ship at Avonmouth, and his letters were being sent here, to be forwarded to him. On Monday last a letter arrived here for him, with the house-flag of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* embossed on the envelope—'

'Ah, I see, that's what she meant!' exclaimed Inspector Willart. 'I'm sorry, Professor. Go on.'

'I took this letter to Mr. Heatherdale myself,' continued the Professor. 'He showed it to me. It was from Captain Murchison, and stated that the *Brackenthorpe Manor* was about to leave the Royal Albert Dock for Avonmouth. Captain Murchison suggested that as his date of sailing from the latter port was uncertain, he might be compelled to summon Mr. Heatherdale at very short notice, and that it would be as well if he sent down his heavy baggage at once. He also mentioned that if Mr. Heatherdale did not care about the prospect of the voyage through the Bay of Biscay in December, he could join the *Brackenthorpe Manor* at Marseilles, his first port of call in the Mediterranean.'

'Did Mr. Heatherdale reply to that letter?' asked Inspector Willart.

'I cannot say,' replied the Professor. 'He told me that he would do so, that he would have his baggage sent direct to Avonmouth from Allingford House, and that he would certainly join the ship at Avonmouth upon hearing further from Captain Murchison. I did not see him again alive.'

Inspector Willart rose from his chair. 'Well, I'm very much obliged to you, Professor,' he said. 'I don't think I need waste your time any further. May I take the telegram you have shown me? I expect Hanslet will like to see it. Thanks very much.'

For the next couple of days we heard nothing further. The Professor refused to discuss the matter, and applied himself more assiduously than ever to the compilation of the book, so rudely interrupted. But I could see that he was only biding his time, that the problem of Mr. Heatherdale's death would never allow him to rest until it was solved. And I was sure that he had very little faith in Hanslet's power to solve it.

Then, on the Sunday afternoon, just after we had finished lunch, Hanslet himself appeared. He looked thoroughly worn out and dispirited; it was easy to see at a glance that he had met with no success.

His first words told us as much. 'Look here, Dr. Priestley, I've come round to apologise,' he said. 'I'm afraid I was a bit offhand the other

day, and I want you and Mr. Merefield to forgive me. I had looked on the whole story of Mr. Heatherdale and his warning as so much poppycock, and finding the poor devil's body like that was the deuce of a shock.'

'I fully understand,' replied the Professor gravely. 'Both Harold and myself are prepared to make every allowance for the state of your feelings. We neither of us bear the slightest malice, I assure you.'

'It's very good of you,' replied the Inspector gratefully. 'I've wanted to kick myself for being such a fool as to push you off like that.'

'I've wanted your advice pretty often in the last few days.'

'I gather that you have not been successful in finding the murderer?' suggested the Professor.

'No, I haven't!' replied Hanslet with emphasis. 'I've got all the police in the county on the move, and I haven't found the ghost of a clue so far. But I have made a good step forward. I know pretty thoroughly the movements of Mr. Heatherdale on Wednesday last.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed the Professor. 'That is indeed a step in advance.'

'It's largely owing to the information you gave me and Willart,' replied Hanslet. 'I saw that housekeeper of Mr. Heatherdale's, and she confirms it in every respect. On Tuesday she got a letter from Mr. Heatherdale, which I have seen, telling her that he had decided to go for a trip on the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, and that she was to pack a trunk with a list of things which he gave her, and send it off by passenger train to Avonmouth Dock. This she did, although she was very much surprised at these instructions. She seemed to know all about the vessel and Mr. Heatherdale's connection with her. She gave me to understand exactly what you had told me, that Mr. Heatherdale hated the whole business, and never referred to it if he could help it. She supposed it was the fright produced by that wretched warning that drove him into such a distasteful course.'

The Professor nodded. 'As I explained to you, that was the case,' he said. 'I fear that my own persuasion was partly responsible for his decision.'

'Exactly,' replied Hanslet. 'You thought he would be safer at sea in Captain Murchison's charge, and you wanted him out of the way while you pursued your own investigations. As I told you before, I think you were quite right. In fact, the very action taken by the murderers proves you to have been right. In seeing their prey about to escape them, they acted at the one period when he was open to attack. And, but for his own fault, that opportunity would never have occurred.'

'I am afraid I don't quite follow you,' said the Professor quietly.

'Why, it's clear enough,' replied Hanslet. 'These fellows, whoever they were, were on the watch. Mr. Heatherdale, on receiving Captain Murchison's letter—for there is no doubt that the letter sent to the Cardinal Hotel was from him, telling him to join the ship before Thursday—went, for some reason of his own, not to Avonmouth, but to Allingford. He probably wanted to give instructions as to the management of affairs during his absence, and it would be easy for him to go on from there. Anyhow we have established the fact that he arrived at Pirton station at 9.42 on Wednesday evening. I enquired there, as soon as I had a chance to get away. The news was out by then, and everyone was only too anxious to tell me what they knew. The fellow who took the tickets was pretty sure that he had seen Mr. Heatherdale get out of the train—couldn't swear to it; there seems to have been a bit of a crowd that evening, but had no doubt in his own mind. However, that'll be no news to you, Professor.'

Hanslet smiled shrewdly in the Professor's direction.

'Yes, I admit I asked him myself,' replied the Professor, quietly.

'So I gathered from what he said,' agreed Hanslet. 'But his evidence is corroborated. There were several cars and carts and things in the station yard, waiting for the train. You know Pirton serves a whole lot of places round, and most of the passengers drive home from there. A farmer, who had come from Newbury, and whose son had met him at Pirton, made a statement to Grainger—you remember Grainger—to the effect that, just as he was starting to drive home, he heard someone call out, "This way,

Mr. Heatherdale, here's the car." He couldn't say any more, didn't see either the man or Mr. Heatherdale, whom, by the way, he didn't know by sight. But, taking the two together, there seems to be no doubt that Mr. Heatherdale was there all right.

'Of course, it struck me that the letter, purporting to come from Captain Murchison, might be a forgery, a trap to catch Mr. Heatherdale. So I set the Avonmouth police to work. They gleaned all the quayside news, from which it appears that the *Brackenthorpe Manor* arrived from London on Tuesday evening and left again on Thursday at noon, having taken on board some cargo for Mediterranean ports. She was expecting a passenger, and her skipper spent the best part of Wednesday evening in Bristol waiting for him. He came back to Avonmouth by the last train, and sent the steward ashore to wait at Avonmouth station until the last moment on Thursday. I have, of course, communicated with the consul at Marseilles, asking him to get a statement from Captain Murchison as soon as he arrives. But there can be very little doubt that the letter was genuine, especially in view of the telegram you saw.'

'Postulating the correctness of your theories, how do you imagine that Mr. Heatherdale met his death?' enquired the Professor as Hanslet paused.

'Once the fellow who called out got him into the car, the rest was easy,' replied the Inspector. 'Presumably, he had a confederate or two inside, who gagged him the minute he got in. From Pirton station they drove to Hilton Pennings, and there flung him out into the ditch. Whether they meant to kill him or not, I can't say. When we examined the body, all the pockets were empty; money, watch papers, everything, completely cleared out. It's just like the case of his brother. I was wondering whether there could possibly be some article of value, just like you read about, the eye of an idol, or something. You see the idea. One of the brothers was known to carry it about with him. Austin was murdered and his body rifled, presumably without result, so Gerald was tackled next. It may be farfetched, but I'm at my wits' end to find a motive.'

Inspector Hanslet rose from his chair and paced the room distractedly. 'I wish to heaven I could see some light from that

direction!" he exclaimed. 'All I've got at present is a car and a voice, no more; no description, or anything. Nothing but a stroke of luck will ever make me able to identify either. But if I could see the motive, I could begin from that end as well.'

'Did you talk to Mrs. Milton?' enquired the Professor abruptly. Hanslet turned and faced him.

'I did,' he replied curtly. 'I knew what you and Mr. Merefield here had found out about her, and I talked to her quite a lot. Perhaps I should say that she talked to me. She is a deep one, is Mrs. Milton. She tried to make out that you know more about the business than you should, Mr. Merefield.'

'Why; what on earth did she know about me?' I exclaimed.

'It seems she saw you in Devizes on Wednesday,' replied Hanslet with a smile. 'It struck her that you avoided her, and she made one or two enquiries, with the result that she found out you were staying at the Bear. Then she found out from Grainger that you were on the spot when the body was discovered. She told me that you were one of the few people who knew anything about Mr. Heatherdale's movements. If she had known that you were at the Pennings when the body was flung out, she would have denounced you as the murderer, I'll warrant. She's a remarkable woman, that.'

'She'll benefit all right from Mr. Heatherdale's death,' I said vindictively. 'I shouldn't wonder if she knew more about it—'

But the Professor held up his hand commandingly. 'We must not indulge in conjecture,' he said. 'You implied, Inspector, that you were uncertain as to whether or not Mr. Heatherdale's assailants intended to kill him or not?'

Hanslet laughed. 'Conjecture won't hurt, Professor,' he replied. 'You may be sure that I'll keep my eye on Mrs. Milton, without any suggestion on Mr. Merefield's part. So far as I can see, she is the only person who gains by Mr. Heatherdale's death, except these rather shadowy relatives in New Zealand. But to answer your question. The only cause of death the doctors could find was this dislocated vertebra, or whatever they call it, in short, a broken neck. Now, it is not easy to break anyone's neck, or at all events, it isn't one of the

obvious means of murder. They tell me that it can be done with a blow, much as a keeper breaks the neck of a wounded rabbit. But it's a trick you have to know how to do. On the other hand, if you pitch a man out of a quickly moving car into a ditch, it's a very likely sort of accident to happen to him. I am inclined to the theory that Mr. Heatherdale's assailants, whoever they were, after going through his belongings pretty thoroughly, which they had plenty of time to do between Pirton station and the Pennings, and having, perhaps, found what they wanted, just chucked him out and made off. Even if he survived, they had probably taken measures against his recognising them.'

'A very curious affair, indeed,' commented the Professor.

'It is, and I don't see my way through it yet,' replied Hanslet. 'But I haven't told you yet what I really came here for. The inquest's tomorrow at Allingford, where we had the body taken. I am going down there this evening, and I wondered whether you and Mr. Merefield would care to come with me. We shall want you both, of course.'

'Certainly,' replied the Professor readily. 'Where do you propose to stay the night?'

'At Devizes,' said Hanslet. 'We can get down there in time for dinner and drive over to Allingford in the morning. The inquest isn't till eleven. The necessary arrangements are all made. I'm the stage manager, of course, and I shall see that as little as possible becomes public at this stage. I don't think it will be necessary to mention the warning. I want to keep that up my sleeve at present.'

So it happened that the three of us travelled down to Devizes once more. Hanslet had taken rooms for us at a private house, by arrangement with the Chief Constable. The whole country was buzzing with the Ailing-ford mystery, as it was called, and the local hotels were full to overflowing with journalists and sensation mongers. On the morrow, the country road from Devizes to Allingford looked almost like the Epsom road on Derby Day; so packed was it with traffic.

We fought our way into the Chequers, where the inquest was to

be held, and the Professor and I were ushered into a room bearing a rudely-scrawled label, 'Witnesses.' It was just upon eleven o'clock, and two other people were already seated upon the hard chairs against the wall. I recognised them as the doctor and Grainger, the constable. Through a door on the opposite side to which we had entered we could see into a room used normally for the reception of char-a-banc parties, now converted, by a skilful disposition of forms and chairs, into a court room. Here, facing a chair as yet unoccupied, were the twelve men of the jury, easily recognisable by their self-conscious expressions, and jostling them, a confused mob of police, pressmen, spectators of all kinds, I looked around the court for anyone I knew, fearing to recognise the features of the capable Mrs. Milton. But she was not to be seen; the only familiar face was that of Mr. Quenton, engaged in an animated discussion with a group of friends.

The door of our little waiting-room opened suddenly and a bespectacled little man, in a morning coat and top hat, bustled through towards the empty chair in the court room. A silence fell upon the spectators, and two burly policemen jammed themselves in the doorway between us, so that I could see nothing more. I gathered that this was the coroner, and could hear his thin, business-like voice as he addressed the jury. It seemed that they had already viewed the body, and that nothing remained to be done but to hear the evidence.

I was the first witness called, and from the very moment that I scrambled to the chair that did duty as a witness-box, I realised how admirably Hanslet had stage-managed the whole affair. I was asked to give my account of the incident in the Pennings on the Wednesday evening, which I did, as clearly as I could. I was asked if I could describe the car, and replied that I merely gathered the impression of a closed vehicle. I could not say whether the body was in the ditch prior to the passage of the car. I should not have noticed it if it had been. I was far too busy saving myself to notice what happened to the car as it passed me. If I had seen a man jump or fall out I should certainly have gone to his assistance. No, I was not injured, merely

shaken. Yes, on the following morning I proceeded with Inspector Hanslet to the spot. Thank you, that was all. Not a word as to what I was doing in the neighbourhood.

While I had been giving my evidence, two other men had arrived in the witnesses' room, the railway porter and a big burly fellow I had never seen before. The porter was called next, and was soon disposed of. He could not swear to having seen Mr. Heatherdale, but was pretty certain he had collected a first-class ticket from London from him. The burly man could swear to having heard a voice say, 'This way, Mr. Heatherdale.' No, he hadn't seen the man who spoke. Too dark. Besides, the station yard was full of people, and the mare was a bit fresh with the cold, and he had his hands full, holding her. Didn't know Mr. Heatherdale by sight, though his missus did, seeing that her sister had come over from Westbury for the day. . . . Exit burly man, still volunteering information.

The doctor came next, extremely important, and speaking very slowly, so as to be sure that the reporters had time to record every word. Death was due to the dislocation of the vertebra of the neck. Yes, the injury might have been caused by a fall from a moving car into a ditch. There were no other signs of violence, except slight bruises and abrasions, doubtless caused by a fall. Was not prepared to swear that the injuries were actually caused by a fall, merely that they were in accordance with such a theory. The deceased might have been killed by a sharp blow on the back of the neck with some heavy but soft instrument, such as a sand-bag, but thought it unlikely. Yes, he had known Mr. Heatherdale ever since he had lived at Allingford House, and could suggest no reason for anyone wishing to murder him.

Grainger gave formal evidence, and then Hanslet took the witness-box. Acting upon information received, he had proceeded to Hilton Pennings—here a juryman interrupted, asking if Hilton Pennings was Marston's Copse; upon being assured that it was, he grumblingly demanded why it should not be called so—and had there found the body. He told the whole story, shortly and clearly, without wasting words. In reply to questions by the coroner he

stated that Mr. Heatherdale had that very day expected to begin a voyage to the Mediterranean on a vessel of which he was part-owner. He had no doubt that the deceased was the victim of foul play; had his fall from the car been an accident, it was incredible that the car should not have stopped. He had at present no evidence to offer as to the identity of the culprit or culprits.

Hanslet bustled into our room and beckoned to the Professor and myself. 'Slip into the car and get back to Devizes before the mob,' he whispered. 'We sha'n't want you again, either of you. I particularly didn't want you called, Professor, though I had to have you on hand in case of accidents. Your name would have brought this business into even greater prominence than it has gained already. I'll join you at the rooms as soon as I can get away. The Chief Constable will give me a lift.'

We cleared out, only too glad of the opportunity, and escaped almost unnoticed by the crowd outside the inn. The Professor was silent during the drive, and only spoke when he had reached the shelter of our rooms.

'Well, Inspector Hanslet seems to have arranged things to his own satisfaction,' he said. 'Of course, he is right, according to his lights. It is his business to insure that nothing shall be made public that could in any way assist the criminal. It has, I believe, been said that the evidence given at an inquest has often enabled a murderer to escape justice.'

'I'm glad he managed to keep Mrs. Milton out of the box,' I remarked. 'I was afraid that she would turn up and spin all sorts of yarns.'

'I think we may safely entrust her to the care of Inspector Hanslet,' replied the Professor. 'Ah, here he is!'

Hanslet entered the room wearing an air of triumph.

'Well, we got through that all right!' he exclaimed. 'The jury found a verdict of murder by person or persons unknown. Just what I wanted. Good chap, that coroner. Remarkably quick in the uptake; saw the importance of not giving away too much. Of course, I told him pretty well all I knew in confidence the other day.'

'I think you are to be congratulated, Inspector,' replied the Professor. 'And now, I suppose, the investigation begins in earnest?'

'And you are free to join in it, Professor,' said Hanslet with a smile. 'Do we hunt in couples, or independently?'

'Independently, if you will permit it,' said the Professor. 'In fact, I propose to leave the field to you. I am anxious to search for facts in other directions than these.'

'I hope you'll find them,' replied Hanslet. 'You won't forget me if you do?'

'Most certainly I shall not. Now, Harold, I think we have just time to catch the three o'clock to Paddington.'

CHAPTER TEN

A NEW DEVELOPMENT

THAT very evening, when he and I were comfortably seated by the study fire, the Professor reverted to the matter of the murder of Gerald Heatherdale.

'The facts, as we know them, are particularly striking,' he observed. 'You will, of course, have noticed that the bodies of the two brothers were found under almost parallel circumstances. If you agree that Mr. Austin was murdered in Horn's Lane, you can scarcely fail to fly to the conclusion that Mr. Gerald was murdered in Hilton Pennings. In fact, so close is the analogy between the two cases, that what applies to one is almost certain to be applied to the other. This I believe to be intentional on the criminal's part, and I believe it to be a tendency of thought we must carefully guard against. Argument by analogy is no substitute for proof by fact.'

'What beats me, sir, is the apparent lack of motive,' I ventured to remark as the Professor paused. 'As Hanslet says, if we could find a motive we should have something solid to begin upon.'

'In this case the search for motive must be secondary to the collection of facts,' replied the Professor. 'It will, however, bear some examination at this stage. In the first place, was the motive in both cases the same? Or were the two brothers murdered from entirely different motives? Or, again, did the murder of Mr. Austin supply a motive for the murder of Mr. Gerald? Until we have answered those questions we can proceed very little further in that direction.'

'The cases are so similar in every respect that we can assume that the same agency inspired the murder of both brothers,' I said. 'If this is so, it looks as if the motive was the same, that the death of both brothers was sought.'

'As a tentative theory we may accept that,' agreed the Professor. 'Only provisionally, however. It is possible that the first murder suggested the second, that Mr. Gerald was murdered by someone who had studied the death of Mr. Austin. However, we will accept your theory for the moment.'

'Now, what facts have we? Mr. Gerald was murdered during the very short space of time during which he was away from the custody of his friends. Until a few hours before his death he had been in London, surrounded by all the safeguards of modern civilisation. A few hours later, he would have been out of reach, on board the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. The agency directing his murder must therefore have been closely informed as to his movements. So far as we know, the number of people so informed is strictly limited. The principal are, you and myself, Inspector Hanslet, whom I kept informed of everything, Captain Murchison, Mr. Withers, who was seen both by myself and Mr. Gerald, and Mrs. Milton. Now, if we turn to motive, which of these has any interest in Mr. Gerald's death just now?'

'Well, sir,' I replied. 'I suppose we can rule out you, Hanslet and myself.'

'Very well, then. Of the three that remain, consider first Captain Murchison. From everything that I have been able to ascertain, from both Mr. Gerald and Mr. Withers, he had every inducement to wish for Mr. Gerald's continued existence.'

Besides, even if it were conceivable that he wished for his death, he would hardly have carried out so daring a crime on the very day when Mr. Gerald was about to be delivered into his hands for a long period. His opportunity would surely have come aboard the *Brackenthorpe Manor*.

'As for Mr. Withers, the facts, which I ascertained during your absence, are these. He is a middle-aged man, enjoying a fair-sized practice. He is, so he informed me, the sole executor and trustee of Sir Francis Heatherdale's will. Under the terms of this will, which he discussed with me very frankly, he receives a thousand pounds in recognition of his services, whenever the balance of the estate changes hands, in other words, on the death of Mr. Austin and Mr. Gerald.'

'Does he, by Jove!' I exclaimed. 'So that, actually, he had an interest in their deaths?'

'To that extent, yes,' replied the Professor. 'I imagine also that the legal business attending these events is also profitable to him. Finally, we come to Mrs. Milton. I was very interested to receive your reports upon her. In addition to these, Mr. Withers made certain statements regarding her. It appears that shortly after his brother's death, Mr. Gerald made a new will. You will realise that he inherited such of his brother's money as he was free to leave, as well as the reversion of the residue of the estate. His personal wealth was therefore practically doubled. It seems that in this new will he left Allingford House, together with a legacy of thirty thousand pounds, to Mrs. Milton.'

'Good heavens!' I said. 'Did Mrs. Milton know that?'

'I think from our knowledge of the characters of Mrs. Milton and Mr. Gerald, we may assume that she did,' replied the Professor drily. 'The remainder of the money Mr. Gerald was able to dispose of was left in comparatively small amounts to various individuals and societies. The bulk of his wealth, under the terms of his father's will, reverts to Dr. Heatherdale, of New Zealand. Captain Murchison was left to shoulder the burden of ownership of *The Brackenthorpe Manor*, with all liabilities, alone.'

'He might have left poor Murchison something, I must say,' I remarked. 'I don't see how he is going to carry on now till the end of the twenty-years period.'

'Mr. Withers was of the same opinion,' agreed the Professor. 'He, of course, knows all about the management of the vessel, and he told me that as a result of enquiries he had made in shipping circles it was certain that the *Brackenthorpe Manor* would have to be run at a loss if the provisions of Sir Francis' will are to be carried out. Perhaps Mr. Gerald would have reconsidered the matter if he had lived to make a voyage in the vessel.'

'Poor old Murchison!' I exclaimed. 'I'm sorry for him; he is a real good fellow, and he's had the most rotten luck. He'll have the devil of a shock when he gets to Marseilles.'

'I fear he will,' replied the Professor. 'However, we are not concerned with that for the moment. You observe the direction in which a consideration of motive leads us.'

'I do indeed, sir,' I said slowly. 'Mrs. Milton is demonstrably the person who benefits to the greatest extent by Mr. Gerald's death, especially as his death followed his brother's. She may, therefore, be said to have a motive for murdering him. But—'

'Exactly!' exclaimed the Professor, completing my unformed thought. 'Even if we suspect her of being the agency behind the crime, what probable theory can we formulate as to her instruments? I understand from Inspector Hanslet, that on the evening of Wednesday last she did not leave Allingford House after four o'clock, and that she had not been out on Thursday morning when he called with the news of the finding of the body. It would appear therefore that she did not actually participate in the commission of the crime.'

'We have no knowledge of when the crime was actually committed,' I suggested. 'Of course, the facts point to Mr. Heatherdale's neck being broken as a result of his being thrown from the car I saw, but we cannot confirm this. We have, at present, no definite knowledge of his movements from the time he left the Cardinal Hotel about four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon until we

found his body about eleven on Thursday morning.'

'I am glad you appreciate that point,' replied the Professor. 'Inspector Hanslet, I am afraid, does not. You will observe the universal tendency of mankind to make their observations fit in with circumstances. At first sight, it appears highly probable that Mr. Heatherdale arrived at Pirton station at nine forty-two, and was driven in a car to Hilton Pennings. The suggestion is so strong that all those questioned bring forward corroborative evidence. The ticket porter, for example, who, when I interrogated him before he knew of the discovery of Mr. Heatherdale's body, did not remember seeing him, was, by the time of the inquest, practically sure that he had seen him. I am not implying that the man was in any way consciously fabricating evidence. This matter of suggestion is wholly subconscious, and it is a phenomenon that we must be particularly careful to guard against.'

'Yes, I noticed that, sir,' I said. 'I think that Hanslet has adopted that theory of Mr. Heatherdale's movements in default of a better. As a matter of fact I don't see any other to account for the body being found where it was.'

'I am not prepared to advance an alternative theory at present,' replied the Professor. 'But let us try to look at the events of Wednesday from Mr. Heatherdale's point of view. Remember that, naturally a timid man, he was suffering from the effects of the shock imparted by the warning he had received. He was expecting a summons from Captain Murchison to join the *Brackenthorpe Manor* at Avonmouth. This summons he presumably received on Wednesday afternoon. I say presumably, for we have not actually seen the letter, though we may infer its contents from Captain Murchison's subsequent telegrams and from Inspector Hanslet's reports of the *Brackenthorpe Manor's* movements. Captain Murchison's letter probably directed him to meet the writer at some convenient rendezvous—possibly Bristol, since we are told that Captain Murchison went to that town to meet a passenger—at some time prior to noon on Thursday, when the vessel was due to sail.

'Now, one would expect Mr. Heatherdale to obey that summons

literally. He felt safe at the Cardinal Hotel, and he felt safe with Captain Murchison. In his eyes, and it appears that he was more correct than we believed, the rest of the world was a pitfall outspread with terrors for him. The last thing I should have expected him to do would be to travel alone to Pirton station, in comparative close proximity to Hilton Pennings, on a winter evening.'

'But he might have sent a wire to someone to meet him,' I objected.

'That possibility occurred to Inspector Hanslet,' replied the Professor. 'He informs me that he has ascertained that no such telegram was received at Allingford. There is no telephone at Allingford House, which precluded the possibility of a trunk call having been made to Mrs. Milton. No, if Mr. Heatherdale travelled by that train to Pirton, he must have done so knowing that he would have to take his chance of finding a conveyance to Allingford House, which is contrary to all we know of his character and habits.'

'Unless, of course, he wished to keep his visit secret for some reason,' I said. 'It is just possible that he did communicate with somebody, the person whose voice was heard calling his name in the station yard. How else can you account for that voice, sir?'

'If those words were indeed uttered, I can only account for them by assuming the presence of someone who wished to convey the impression that Mr. Heatherdale was there,' replied the Professor. 'But, as I warned you, I am not now endeavouring to formulate an alternative theory, but merely to state the objections to the present one. I repeat that it seems to me almost inconceivable that Mr. Heatherdale should have undertaken that journey without informing some one or other of his friends.'

'Again, take the matter of the warning, the significance of which has never yet been fully realised. We can, I think, afford to reject the possibility of its being unconnected with the murder. The coincidence of the body being found at the place mentioned in the warning is too great to fall within the domain of the theory of probabilities. Again, you are, I take it, convinced that the driver of the car which so nearly ran over you on Wednesday evening must

have seen you?'

'I am absolutely convinced of it, sir,' I said.

'You have already given me the reasons for your conviction, and I am entirely satisfied with them. Now, assuming that Mr. Heatherdale was thrown from that car, and that its occupant knew of your presence, the latter appears to have incurred a very grave risk, apparently for the sole reason of fulfilling the terms of the warning. There are plenty of places other than Hilton Pennings on that remarkably lonely road, where the body could have been disposed of. Indeed, I dare say that there are many spots on that vast stretch of unfrequented downland where a body could be hidden, with the probability that it would never be found for years, if at all. Yet, in spite of this, the body was deposited almost under your eyes, the only precaution taken being to render you temporarily incapable of observation.'

'I never thought of it in that light, sir!' I exclaimed.

'The murderer must have had some pressing reason for depositing the body at that particular spot,' continued the Professor. 'Now, in most cases of murder, the disposal of the body is the principal difficulty. The body is in itself valuable evidence, and the suppression of this evidence is the chief concern of the criminal. But here we have a criminal or criminals, who had successfully accomplished their purpose, and had before them unusually favourable opportunities for disposing of the body in an almost deserted countryside.

These downs are covered with pits and irregularities where a body might be hidden with very little fear of immediate discovery. Yet, so great was their desire to deposit the body in one place where it must infallibly be searched for—a place, you will observe, normally deserted, and so eminently suitable for deposition—that they proceeded with their purpose almost under your eyes.'

'Of course, remembering the warning, Hilton Pennings would have been searched as soon as it became known that Mr. Heatherdale had disappeared.'

'Exactly. Now, what was their reason for this action? Simply I take it, to ensure that the body should be found.'

The Professor leant back in his chair with an expression of

triumph. But I am afraid that his meaning was not at first clear to me.

'Why were they so anxious that the body should be found, sir?' I enquired.

'It seems obvious enough,' replied the Professor somewhat testily. 'If Mr. Heatherdale had merely disappeared, there would have been no evidence of his death. In other words, his will could not have been proved until an application for presumption of death had been granted by the courts. Many years might have elapsed before this, during which time the legatees would not have enjoyed their legacies. This fact is worth considering in any investigation into the motive for Mr. Heatherdale's murder.'

I thought for a moment, as the significance of this remark unfolded itself to me.

'Then in that case, sir, it seems pretty certain that the murderers were interested in what would happen as a result of Mr. Heatherdale's death, rather than in his death itself,' I ventured at last.

'It would appear so,' agreed the Professor. 'We are, therefore, justified, if my reasoning is correct, in ruling out what we may term exterior motives, such as personal vengeance or Inspector Hanslet's romantic suggestion of a search for some secret object of value.'

'Yes, of course, sir,' I replied. 'And, surely, the same remark applies to Mr. Austin's murder?'

But the Professor shook his head. 'You forget that we have no facts to prove that Mr. Austin received his warning before his death, or even that his body was found before the warning was written. As I have said before, it may be that that warning was inserted in Mr. Austin's clothes in order to give additional weight to the warning about to be issued to Mr. Gerald. Until we have ascertained that point, we cannot theorise upon Mr. Austin's death. But that brings us back to a consideration of the reasons why Mr. Gerald's warning was issued.'

'I think you have established the reasons, sir,' I suggested. 'In order that the body should be found as soon after the murder as

possible, Hilton Pennings was a safe place to deposit it, but it was necessary to insure a search being made for it.'

'Yes,' replied the Professor. 'But I think there was an additional reason. Probability leads me to abandon the suggestion that the note received by Mr. Gerald was a genuine warning, that is, that it was meant to enable him to escape his fate. I think, on the contrary, that it was meant to drive him to it. I blame myself that I did not see this more clearly at the time. Had I done so, I should have done my best to persuade him to remain at Allingford House. The murderers would never have taken action there; the risk of discovery was too great. Yet Mr. Gerald, a very nervous subject, would probably have died of fright if he had been forced to remain. Whoever wrote that warning knew that well enough. The author of that note was very well acquainted with Mr. Gerald's psychology, of that I have no doubt.'

'Who do you imagine wrote it, sir?' I ventured eagerly.

But the Professor was not to be drawn. 'I have told you repeatedly that I am not prepared to formulate a theory until I have many more facts at my disposal,' he replied.

'I should have thought that Allingford was the most likely place in which to ascertain them,' I suggested.

'Possibly, but I think that we can safely leave the Allingford field open to Inspector Hanslet. Barely a week has yet to elapse before Christmas, and, unless Hanslet has solved the mystery by that time, I purpose to begin an investigation of my own as soon as Christmas is over.'

And that is all I could get out of him. We resumed once more the compilation of the book, and the death of Mr. Heatherdale was ostensibly allowed to fade into the background. But I, who knew the Professor's methods, was well aware that his mind was reviewing every fact and every possibility, as he would have done a tangled problem in his dearly-loved mathematics.

It was not until the afternoon of Boxing Day that anything fresh happened. Then, about tea-time, we had a visit from Inspector Hanslet.

He wasted no time in preliminaries. 'Of course, you know what I've come to talk about,' he began. 'This infernal Heatherdale case.'

'Ah, I imagined as much,' replied the Professor. 'Have you met with any success in the identification of the murderers?'

'No, I haven't!' exclaimed Hanslet forcibly. 'I may have my suspicions, but devil a bit of real evidence have I found. I'd better tell you what I've learnt and then you can judge for yourself.'

'In the first place, I think I have confirmed that Mr. Heatherdale travelled down to Pirton by that train all right. You remember Inspector Willart, whom I sent round to see you? Well, he knows the stationmaster's people at Paddington pretty well. They made enquiries, and found a porter who remembers a man answering to Mr. Heatherdale's description arriving in a taxi with two suit-cases on Wednesday afternoon. He can't remember the time exactly, there were a lot of people travelling the week before Christmas, of course, but he says it must have been between five and seven. Nor does he remember the train he put him into, but the carriage was a first non-smoker, and the porter got him a corner seat, facing the engine. Seems pretty conclusive, doesn't it?'

'Perhaps hardly that, but the information is interesting,' replied the Professor in a noncommittal tone.

'What bothers me is where the car picked him up at the other end,' continued Hanslet. 'I've interviewed everybody, or nearly everybody, who was in the station yard that evening. There were several local cars waiting to meet people by that train, and by an up train which comes in a few minutes later. I've satisfied myself as to the movements of all these. The only strange vehicle was a closed motor-van, which one or two people noticed, but did not recognise. It drove up a few minutes before the London train came in, and as far as I can gather, waited for the up train. Anyhow, no one remembers seeing it drive away. But I'm not worrying about it, for I can't imagine Mr. Heatherdale getting into a strange van to drive to Allingford House.'

'Neither can I,' agreed the Professor.

'What I suppose happened is this,' continued Hanslet. 'The

criminals had a car standing in one of the lanes near the station—it's devilish dark under the trees at that time of night, as I've seen for myself, and it's quite likely nobody noticed it. One of the occupants walked into the station yard, hailed Mr. Heatherdale as he comes out—that accounts for the words that farmer-fellow heard—and led him to the car. The rest of the business we can guess.'

Inspector Hanslet paused, then drew his chair nearer to ours.

'Now, what I'm going to say must not be breathed outside this room. Mr. Withers, Mr. Heatherdale's solicitor, the man you went to see the other day and who told you all about the will, came down to Allingford House the day after the inquest, for the funeral. What's more, he's been there ever since. Stayed over Christmas, if you please. He and Mrs. Milton seem on very good terms indeed; they're as thick as—well, thieves, if you like.

'You can't be too inquisitive on a matter like this, and I began to take an interest in Mr. Withers. You see, as you told me, he makes a thousand and one pickings out of Mr. Heatherdale's death. I put Willart on the track once more, and he discovered a queer thing. Withers left his office early on the Wednesday that the crime was committed, *and he did not go home that night*. He lives in a hotel in Norfolk Street, and the porter there is quite sure on that point. I haven't discovered where he spent the evening yet, but I will.'

The Professor leant back in his chair, and gazed at the ceiling for a few minutes in silence.

'Without appearing unduly inquisitive, I suppose that you will return to the neighbourhood of Allingford to continue your investigations?' he remarked at last.

'Rather, I'm going back to-morrow,' replied Hanslet. 'Like to come and bear a hand, Professor?'

'No, thank you, Inspector,' said the Professor gravely. 'I propose to make certain investigations on my own part, but not in that direction. You will permit me to thank you for sharing your information with me.'

'Oh, that's all right!' exclaimed Hanslet, preparing to go. 'One good turn deserves another, you know, and you told me all I know

of Mrs. Milton and Mr. Withers. Well, good-bye, Professor. I'll let you know if there's anything fresh.'

The Professor waited until he had gone, then turned to me with a smile. 'Inspector Hanslet's enthusiasm is certainly refreshing,' he said. 'You will, of course, appreciate the relative importance of the information he has just given us. The evidence of the Paddington porter is, of course, valueless. How many gentlemen, answering any given description, arrive at that station in a taxi with two suitcases during an afternoon shortly before Christmas? The individual obviously made no impression on the porter, or he would have remembered what train he put him into. He merely vaguely recalled such a man on being questioned some days later. But, on the other hand, the news of Mr. Withers is interesting.'

He paused while I waited for some comment upon the presence of Mr. Withers at Allingford House and his movements on the day of the crime. But instead of this, I was confronted with a sudden question.

'Where was the warning sent to Mr. Heatherdale posted?'

'London, E..2, sir,' I replied.

'A large and thickly populated area. A very favourable district in which to post a letter of which it was desired to hide the origin. But, taken in conjunction with Inspector Hanslet's obvious suspicions—'

'By Jove, sir!' I interrupted. 'Mr. Withers' office is in Coleman Street, E.C.2.!'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHITE PELHAM

I WAS so intrigued with this aspect of the matter—for it was new to me, whatever consideration the Professor might already have given to it—that I could think of nothing else for the rest of the evening. The Professor, however, declined to discuss the question any further, and devoted himself to a careful study of the ordnance

survey. I could not see which sheet absorbed his attention, nor did he drop any hint which might have enlightened me.

It was not until breakfast time on the following morning that he mentioned the Heatherdale business again, and then his remark was so wholly unexpected that I stared at him for a moment in sheer amazement.

'I want you to take the first train from Liverpool Street to White Pelham, Harold,' he said quietly.

As I say, I could not answer him for a moment. It was so utterly unlike the Professor to abandon a hot and promising scent for one which by his own admission must be utterly stale by now. Or perhaps it was that he wanted me out of the way—my heart sank at the idea.

'White Pelham, sir!' I exclaimed. 'Why, surely—'

He looked up sharply, and seeing the obvious look of disappointment on my face, smiled not unkindly.

'Yes, White Pelham, my boy,' he repeated. 'I want you to go there and explore the resources of the local inn. If you think we can spend a couple of days there without incurring too great a measure of discomfort, you will send me a telegram, and I will join you by the train which leaves Liverpool Street at 8.5 this evening. If, on the other hand, you think that we shall make ourselves too conspicuous by staying in the village itself, you will arrange accommodation at Market Wenden, the nearest town.'

'Very good, sir,' I replied, without, I fear, much enthusiasm.

Again the Professor smiled. 'I think I can read your thoughts,' he said quietly. 'You imagine that we are about deliberately to leave the scene of action. But there are facts which appear to me to be essential to the complete understanding of this matter, and these facts are connected with the death of Mr. Austin Heatherdale. Inspector Hanslet, with far greater resources at his disposal, is investigating the death of Mr. Gerald. He will keep us informed of everything which he discovers.'

In spite of these reassuring words, it was with no very good grace that I set off for White Pelham. Had I been consulted, I should

have set off on the trail of this solicitor fellow, Withers. Here was a man, who, by his own confession, benefited by Mr. Gerald's death, and who seemed to be on exceedingly good terms with Mrs. Milton, the other principal beneficiary. We knew that this man was not in his usual haunts on the day of the murder, we had to account for the presence in Pirton station yard of a man whose voice Mr. Gerald would recognise and trust. And, instead of following up this most promising train of clues, the Professor chose to leave the matter to Hanslet in order to explore the scene of a fifteen months old crime! It was not by any means my idea of conducting an investigation.

White Pelham, when I reached it after a remarkably tedious journey, proved to be a cluster of picturesque houses round a church with a noble square tower. I discovered that the place contained an inn, which, upon inspection, looked not unpromising. I determined to test its possibilities, and opening a door marked 'Hotel Entrance,' found myself in a narrow hall, with a parlour, in which a cheerful fire blazed, on the left.

I found a bell, and rang it expectantly. A middle-aged, bustling woman answered it and smiled reassuringly at my question. Oh, yes, I certainly could have some lunch. There was a cold round of beef in the house, or, if I liked to wait, a steak could be cooked for me. Having some experience of steaks, as understood in village inns, I elected for the cold beef. In a creditably short space of time the table was laid, and the inn-keeper's wife, as I took her to be, came and ministered to my wants.

I took full opportunity of her presence to commence my enquiries. Yes, they served quite a lot of lunches, especially in summer. Although the house was not actually on the main road, several motorists were in the habit of turning off through the village, and many of these came here to lunch. But the house did not depend for its custom on the road. There were golf-links at Hatching Pelham, a couple of miles away.

'Do you ever have people staying here?' I asked casually.

'Oh, yes, sir! Why, most week-ends we have visitors, even at this

time of the year, and in summer the house is often full for weeks on end. It isn't only the golf-links as brings them, there's plenty of fishing in the streams about.'

'Fishing, is there?' I exclaimed. 'Well, now, that's extraordinary! I've got an old friend who's very fond of fishing. As soon as he heard that I was coming down this way, he asked me to look out for a quiet place where he could stop and catch a few fish.'

'Then he'd better come down here and talk to my husband,' replied the woman briskly. 'He could tell the gentleman all he wants to know.'

'By Jove, that's a very good idea!' I said. 'Look here, if I sent him a wire to come down this evening do you think you could put us both up for a day or two?'

'Certainly we could, sir, and pleased to do it. The house is empty just now, and I'm sure you would be very comfortable.'

'I'm sure we would. I'll send off a wire to him as soon as I've finished lunch.'

The woman bustled off, and shortly returned again. 'My husband says he'll be very pleased to tell your friend all about the streams in these parts,' she said. 'But there's no fishing at this time of year, he says.'

'Oh no, of course not,' I replied loftily. As a matter of fact I had no idea when coarse fishing seasons began or ended. 'My friend is only anxious to make a few enquiries, so that he will know where to come later. I shall send him a wire to come down, and instead of going back to London myself as I intended, I shall stay here with him.'

I finished my cold beef and beer, and strolled off into the village to send a wire to the Professor. This duty accomplished, I was sorely tempted to enquire for Horn's Lane and the late Mr. Austin Heatherdale's house. But, not knowing the lines upon which the Professor meant to work, I refrained. Instead, I set off to walk towards some low hills which I could see in the distance, and having covered a dozen miles or so and gained a fair idea of the lie of the country, returned to the inn just as darkness was falling.

I was regaled with an excellent tea, and explained that my friend Dr. Priestley was to be expected by the last train, and would no doubt, it being a fine evening, prefer to walk from the station. Then, wishing to avoid conversation until the Professor should arrive and give me my cue, I walked to the station and caught a train to Market Wenden.

The Professor, I knew, would dine before leaving London, so I filled up my time by exploring the busy little town, then fortified myself with a meal at the George. The Professor's train arrived to time, and I met him on the platform. We took our places in the local train, and I acquainted him with my doings and the excuse I had given for his visit.

'Excellent, my boy,' he was good enough to remark. 'What is the name of this inn at which we are about to stay?'

'The Bull's Head, sir,' I replied. 'Not a bad little place in its way at all.'

'The Bull's Head,' repeated the Professor thoughtfully. 'A very interesting example of the symbolism which still survives in many of our inn signs. The bull's head, as you are doubtless aware, is one of the earliest symbols known to man. It can be traced back into the very birth of antiquity, and almost every religion of which we have any knowledge has adopted it in turn. We meet it in Egypt, in Assyria, and in Greece, always with some symbolic meaning, and in our own day it is still regarded as a symbol of St. Luke. The medieval printers and paper-makers, heretics almost to a man, adopted it as one of the principal characters of their secret faith. But I fear that, in the present century, the bull's head has survived only as a name and not as a symbol.'

'I'm not so sure, sir,' I said irreverently. 'I fancy that we shall discover that the bull's head survives as a very apt symbol of cold beef, if my experience of to-day is any guide. It seems to be the staple food of the inhabitants.'

But the Professor made no comment upon this. We completed the slow journey in silence, and in due course the train pulled into White Pelham station.

'It was by this train that Mr. Austin is supposed to have returned on the night before his body was found,' remarked the Professor, as we stepped on to the platform. 'You will notice that there are quite a number of passengers. White Pelham, like Pirton, evidently serves a considerable district.'

We passed through the barrier, and I noticed that the station lights were already being put out one by one. The collector took our tickets without glancing at us, and in another few seconds we had reached the dark road outside.

'Now, what would the evidence of any of the railway servants be worth as to whether you and I had travelled to White Pelham by that train?' observed the Professor. 'I came down by it on purpose, as I wished to see for myself. This road leads straight to the village, does it not?'

'It does, sir,' I replied. 'I think I noticed this afternoon the path leading off towards Horn's Lane.'

'Ah, that we will explore to-morrow,' said the Professor. 'Our goal at present is the Bull's Head. A walk will be agreeable after our journey.'

We reached the Bull's Head after some twenty minutes steady travelling upon the frost-bound road, and were duly made welcome by the landlady.

'You must be cold after your journey, sir,' she said. 'Wouldn't you care for something hot before you go to bed?'

'A very good suggestion,' agreed the Professor. 'A little rum with some hot water and a shaving of lemon peel would be very acceptable. Perhaps your husband would join us?'

She glanced at the clock which ticked aggressively on the mantelpiece.

'He'll just be shutting the bar, sir,' she replied. 'No doubt he'd be very pleased to talk to you two gentlemen about the fishing.'

She disappeared, and in a few minutes we heard a heavy step in the passage. The door stood open, and a cheerful, red-faced man entered, carrying a tray upon which stood a dark bottle, three tumblers and a steaming jug of hot water.

'Good evening gentlemen, I'm very pleased to see you, I'm sure,' he said heartily. 'It's a cold night, and a drop of hot grog's the very thing to keep the cold out. You've come down here to see what the chances are of a bit of fishing, my wife tells me.'

'Oh, just to have a look round,' replied the Professor, as our host busied himself with the mixing of the drinks.

'Well, you couldn't have come to a better place, though I says it as shouldn't,' replied the landlord. 'Come the morning, I'll show you the biggest pike ever hooked in this country. Stuffed and hanging in a glass case in the bar it is, and I'm the man what caught it. Not far from here either, over by Carter-ford Bridge.'

'I'd be glad to see it,' said the Professor. 'I suppose you know this country pretty well?'

'Born and bred in this very village,' replied the landlord conclusively. 'Reckon I know every stream for twenty mile round. Started fishing them as a boy with a bent pin, I did.'

The fragrant steam of the skilfully-brewed grog diffused itself through the little parlour, and under its benign influence the landlord grew reminiscent. He told us of pools where the trees overhung the water, in whose depths had lurked monsters which now decorated the walls of the bar, of sluggish streams running through water meadows where supreme strategy was needed to outwit perch and roach. And we sat listening, sipping our drinks, while our host poured out a list of local names and local worthies, a village Iliad of doughty deeds.

'Pretty quiet part of the world this, apart from the fishing,' I put in, as the landlord drained his glass and put it down with a final gesture. 'Not much excitement about, is there?'

'We get excitement enough sometimes, when we don't want it,' replied the landlord forcibly. 'Why, surely, you must have heard of the murder of Mr. Heatherdale last winter? The papers were full of it!'

'I remember the case, now that you mention it,' said the Professor. 'Of course. It took place somewhere in this vicinity, did it not?'

'In this vicinity!' exclaimed our host. 'Why, the poor gentleman was murdered by a gang of roughs in Horn's Lane, in this very parish! Terrible business it was, to be sure. Why, half the folk was

afraid to go out after dark for months afterwards.'

But the Professor, rather to my astonishment, did not seem anxious to hear the details of the tragedy recounted by the landlord. I saw a sudden look of interest leap into his eyes as he spoke again.

'Horn's Lane!' he exclaimed. 'Now, that is very interesting!'

He took the one-inch Ordnance Survey from his pocket, and spread it on the table before us. With the point of his finger he indicated the spot on the map.

'There you are, HORN'S LANE!' he exclaimed. 'Observe the apostrophe, indicating the lane of someone of the name of Horn. Did you ever hear of a family of Horn living in this neighbourhood?'

'Can't say I did,' replied the landlord, thus directly appealed to. 'Might have been afore my time, though. I've heard it called Horn's Lane ever since I was a lad.'

'And what do you suppose the sign of your house means?' persisted the Professor, thoroughly warmed up to his subject.

'Means? Lord, sir, I don't suppose it means anything. There's been a Bull's Head in White Pelham for hundreds of years, I reckon. This house has been rebuilt, but the Bull's Head stood here when there was coaches on the road. I've got a picture of it somewhere.' ,,

The Professor turned to me. 'No doubt you observe the connection. The Horns have, of course, the same symbolic meaning as the Bull's Head. The original name of this spot was not Horn his lane, but Horns Lane, without the apostrophe. There must certainly be some reason for the persistence of the symbol in this locality.'

He sat thinking silently and then suddenly turned to the landlord once more.

'Are there any dene-holes in this neighbourhood?' he enquired abruptly.

'Dene-holes?' repeated the landlord blankly. 'What be they, sir? I never heard of them.'

'Why, there are plenty in some parts of Essex,' replied the Professor. 'Not far from here, I believe. They are shafts, sunk usually

some fifty feet downwards into the chalk, and terminating as a rule in a hollowed-out chamber.'

'Oh, I know what you mean, sir,' said the landlord. 'Danes' pits we call them. No, I can't say that there's any actually in the village, but I have heard of one or two over towards Royston way. I've never taken much heed of them, they're scarcely in my line.'

'You are sure there is not one anywhere near Horn's Lane?' persisted the Professor.

'I never heard of one,' replied the landlord reflectively. 'But some years ago I recollect that Mr. Hudson, of Coldharbour Farm, lost a heifer, and they lowered a man down an old well somewhere near there to look for her. I remember it, for they came to borrow my ladder, and it wasn't long enough.'

'Ah!' said the Professor. 'So there's a disused well, is there? I shall like to have a look at that.'

The landlord looked at the clock and rose to his feet.

'Well, gentlemen,' he said. 'I'll be saying good-night. I'll ask you to be so kind as to put the lamp out when you go upstairs.'

We bade our host good-night, and the Professor sat for some time in silence.

'I think that there is every probability that this disused well is a dene-hole,' he said suddenly. 'In any case, we will explore it. It will afford us an admirable pretext for examining the spot in which Mr. Austin Heatherdale's body was found.'

'What exactly is a dene-hole, sir?' I enquired.

The Professor smiled. 'The archaeological knowledge which is supposed to have attracted you to Wiltshire does not appear to be very extensive,' he replied. 'Dene-holes are, as you heard me say, vertical shafts sunk into the chalk, terminating in chambers varying in size. As to their origin and purpose, the authorities are not agreed. They are certainly of great antiquity; so much is conceded. Some hold that they were constructed by the ancient inhabitants of this island as refuges from the Danes, hence both Danes' pits and dene-holes. Others hold that they were storage places for fodder, precursors of the modern silo. Others again

believe that they are connected with the rites of the ancient Druidical religion, a theory I am myself inclined to favour.'

'But I don't see the connection between them and the Bull's Head,' I said. 'Of course, the connection between Horn's Lane and the Bull's Head is obvious, when you point it out. But what made you guess that there might be a dene-hole in Horn's Lane?'

'It was a pure guess,' replied the Professor. 'I was endeavouring to account for the somewhat striking persistence of symbolism in this village. A peculiarity of these dene-holes is that the walls of the chambers at the bottom of them are frequently found to be decorated with symbolic designs, roughly carved in the chalk. It is this fact that inclines me to believe that they are in some way connected with the religion of the Druids, which abounded in symbolic forms. Avebury, as you may have discovered while you were in Wiltshire, which is undoubtedly of Druidical significance, was originally built in the form of a serpent, one of the favourite figures of symbolism. Other frequently occurring figures are the cup, the sun, the star, the dove, and so forth. The Bull's Head in particular is frequently found wherever symbolism is employed. Now if we conceded the existence of an ancient dene-hole in this neighbourhood, upon the walls of which are inscribed the Bull's Head, as it is usually depicted in these cases, with long and conspicuous horns, we find a reason for the place-name Horn's Lane, and for the sign of this inn.'

'It sounds like rather a long shot, sir,' I said. 'Still, if this disused well, as our host calls it, is really a dene-hole, it would appear to be justified.'

'It is not such a long shot as it appears,' replied the Professor tolerantly. 'It is a matter of common knowledge that in this part of England dene-holes occur not infrequently along the line of the chalk outcrop. Here, although the soil is probably clay in the valleys, the rising ground is practically all chalk. To infer the existence of dene-holes in this vicinity is not, therefore, a very great stretch of imagination. Again, place-names and inn signs are derived far more frequently from symbolic forms than is generally realised, as any

work on the subject will convince you. I was, therefore, justified in connecting Horn's Lane with a possible dene-hole, especially since the sign of this most excellent inn has thrown a new light on the name. I shall be most interested in discovering if my conjecture is well grounded.'

'Then you mean to have a look at this disused well, sir?' I said with a smile.

'I do indeed, or rather I propose that you should do so for me,' replied the Professor. 'As I have said, it will provide us with an ostensible motive for exploring Horn's Lane. Your young muscles ought to be equal to the task of climbing fifty foot of rope.'

'Oh, I think I can manage that all right, sir,' I said confidently. 'I was something of a gymnast at school, and have always kept myself pretty fit since.'

'Very well; you had better go to Market Wenden in the morning and purchase ten fathoms or so of suitable rope. You will know better than I do the kind best adapted to the purpose. I have an electric torch, and that is probably all we shall need. If anyone enquires as to our presence in Horn's Lane, our archaeological interest will furnish a reply.'

The Professor searched in his pockets and produced a typewritten document, which I recognised with interest.

'I have brought the notes you made upon Mr. Austin's murder, shortly after Mr. Gerald's first visit to us,' he said. 'I should recommend you to read them over in order to refresh your memory.'

'Oh, I think I remember them well enough, sir,' I replied. 'I've often thought about the matter since Mr. Gerald was murdered. The crimes were so extraordinarily similar that there can be no doubt that Hanslet's theory is correct, that Mr. Austin was murdered, as Mr. Gerald was, between the station and his house. But how a powerful man like him could be overcome so apparently easily is what beats me.'

'It is the faint hope that an exploration of Horn's Lane, even after all these months, will throw a light upon these very points, that has brought me here to-day,' said the Professor gravely. 'But before we

commence our investigations, I would ask you to clear your mind of all conjecture, and to confine yourself to facts alone. All we know for certain is that Mr. Heatherdale was last seen alive on October 10th, when he left home, and that his body was found at 6.30 in the morning of October 13th in Horn's Lane. As to how his body reached that spot, whether alive or dead, we have as yet no reliable evidence.'

'Surely, sir, there is very little doubt that he travelled from London that day by the same train as you came down by to-night?' I replied.

'Very little doubt is the basis of every false theory!' exclaimed the Professor testily. 'People jump from apparent probability to conviction based on certainty upon the smallest provocation. If they could see the depth of the gulf that lies between the two they might well hesitate. It is for this very reason that I wish you to approach this matter with an open mind. Imagine for the time being that Mr. Austin's body was found in Horn's Lane under the circumstances as they have been described to us, but without any other evidence. Previous investigators have been obsessed by the idea, suggested in advance, that he travelled down to White Pelham by that particular train. Let us adopt the view that we have no knowledge of any such journey, and endeavour to discover from the facts the most likely theory of Mr. Austin's movements immediately before his death. I repeat that it is possible that an examination of Horn's Lane may help us.'

'I can't help remembering that Mr. Austin had a warning as well as his brother, sir,' I remarked. 'Of course, as you say, that warning may have been written after the event. But if it wasn't, it looks like an attempt to decoy Mr. Austin to Horn's Lane. From what we know of his character, he would be the very man to walk along Horn's Lane to show that he wasn't afraid. I think it is a point worth bearing in mind.'

'It certainly is,' replied the Professor. 'But, on the other hand, it might have been written to strengthen the conviction that he was actually murdered in Horn's Lane. Unfortunately, we can only conjecture as to this warning. We merely know that it was found, not

how or when it was written or even received. But to return to your suggestion that it was written as a decoy. In that case, it must have been written by someone who was familiar with Mr. Austin's character, to the extent that the writer knew it would have the effect of an inducement to him to frequent the spot named.

'Now this, though I wish to impress upon you that it is purely hypothesis, entirely unsupported as yet by any facts in our possession, is significant. Let us consider once more what we know of Mr. Austin's movements during his visit to London. Considering the various statements of strangers, all, as I think I have demonstrated, more or less unreliable, we know only one thing is certain, that somebody took Mr. Austin's bag from the hotel porter at Liverpool Street. I am inclined to think that that individual actually travelled by the last train to White Pelham. To assume that this individual was Mr. Austin is pure conjecture. If it was not Mr. Austin, it must have been somebody who was wholly cognisant of his movements.

'But putting aside the evidence of strangers, there is one of Mr. Austin's intimate acquaintances who testifies that he saw him during his visit to London. As matters stand at present, this acquaintance is the last person who saw Mr. Austin Heatherdale alive.'

'Mr. Withers, sir!' I exclaimed. 'The very man to know that Mr. Austin would defy a warning.'

The Professor looked at me severely. 'That remark appears to me to display a certain confusion of thought,' he said. 'Dear me, it is quite time we went to bed.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE DENE-HOLE

I TOOK an early train next morning to Market Wenden and bought ten fathoms of good soft white rope, of a suitable thickness for climb-

ing purposes. The Professor was waiting for me at White Pelham station on my return, and we set off at once on foot for Horn's Lane.

'I have studied the map, and I think we can exactly follow the track Mr. Austin would have taken on his way home,' he said. 'The stile you noticed on the left leads across two fields, then enters the defile between trees marked as Horn's Lane. At the further end of Horn's Lane the footpath comes out again upon the main road. By turning to the left again along this road we should, in a quarter of a mile or so, reach the house in which Mr. Austin lived. There is no doubt that an active man, knowing his way, would save a considerable time on his way home by using this route in preference to following the road through the village.'

We walked in silence along the road, over the stile, and across the fields. The Professor, as I could see, was observing every detail, and I did my best to emulate him. There seemed to be nobody about; the countryside had that desolated look which it always seems to bear in winter. With the exception of a man ploughing with a team of horses in the distance, we did not see a soul from the time we left the station road until we reached a fair-sized coppice.

'This is the beginning of Horn's Lane,' said the Professor. 'You will observe that it is the remains of a fairly wide track, probably an old road which has become disused. No doubt, when crops are growing in the fields which we have just passed through, it is possible to trace the continuation of the track across them by a slight difference in tint. Even now, I expect the whole length of the track can be detected from the air. However, we are not concerned with the past history of Horn's Lane, but with its present condition.'

It was quite clear that, whatever importance the so-called lane may have had in the past, it was very little used now. A track, some five yards wide, had at one time been worn through the slightly rising land on which the coppice grew, so that the lane ran on an average of ten feet below the surrounding land, which was covered with medium-sized trees and undergrowth. But the lane itself and the banks which bounded it were almost grown over with saplings and briars, leaving only a tortuous path along which we were compelled to walk in Indian file. Although the ground was wet and

sticky beneath our feet, I could see no signs whatever of recent footmarks.

'This is a lonely enough spot for a murder, sir,' I ventured.

'Yes, and it is possibly even more lonely since Mr. Austin's death than before,' replied the Professor. 'The place has no doubt acquired a bad name in the local imagination, and even the very few people who might have occasion to use this path prefer the longer walk through the village. Ah, I expect that was the spot in which the body was found.'

The Professor, who was leading the way, stopped, and I peered over his shoulder. We had come to a point where the path widened into a sort of a rough clearing, about ten yards long, and occupying nearly the whole width of the old lane. The banks on either side were here only a couple of feet high, and we could look for some little distance into the wood on either side, which was slightly thinner than before.

'Yes, this must be the place,' continued the Professor. 'We need not be afraid of obliterating any traces by walking on it. The crime was committed too long ago, and too many people have visited the scene since, for us to hope for any results of that kind. You remember that Mr. Gerald told us that his brother's body was found doubled up on the ground, with the signs of a struggle around him. Signs of a struggle, in a place like this, means I suppose trampled grass and so forth. The grass underfoot is thick enough to be well trampled and yet yield no recognisable footprints. Yet I wonder, I wonder!'

The Professor stared at the ground for a few minutes, then suddenly turned to me, with a strange look of speculation in his eyes.

'I should not be surprised if that disused well which the landlord mentioned is quite close,' he said quietly. 'Will you explore the wood on either side while I examine this spot more closely?'

'Very good, sir,' I replied, without much enthusiasm. I wanted to find evidence, of what sort I had no idea, and the prospect of investigating a problematical antiquity did not appeal to me. Still, I set off through the wood on the north side of the lane, and after

walking a hundred yards or so came out upon a stretch of pasture land, in which a few cows were grazing. A few minutes' search convinced me that there was nothing like a disused well about, for surely it would be fenced in some way against accidents.

I retraced my steps, crossed the lane, and penetrated the wood on the south side. Here it was much narrower than I expected, and in a very short time I found myself at the edge of it. Another meadow stretched in front of me, and I carefully surveyed as much of it as I could see. A few yards from me was a square of rough fencing. I ran up to this, and in the centre found the mouth of a narrow pit, almost overgrown with weeds and nettles. This was evidently the place.

I walked back through the wood to the clearing where I had left the Professor. He was pacing about deliberately, with his eyes fixed on the ground, but he looked up as he heard me coming. 'Well?' he exclaimed, and from the tone of his voice I guessed that so far the facts he sought had eluded him.

'I've found the disused well, sir,' I replied. 'It's only a few yards away from here, through the trees.'

'Ah! Then I think we'll turn our attention to it. There is very little of interest to be seen here. If only I'd been consulted when the crime was committed! However, it is too late to complain of that now.'

I led the way to the fencing, and the Professor peered over it at the mouth of the pit. 'It may or may not be a dene-hole,' he remarked. 'I think that the question is worth deciding, if you feel equal to the task of descending it.'

I climbed over the fence, and lay on the ground with my head over the hole. As I tore aside the weeds, I found that it was considerably wider than I had imagined. A very thin layer of soil covered the chalk, and I could see the top of the shaft, roughly hewn through the chalk itself. Picking up a small stone, I dropped it into the blackness. In rather less than a couple of seconds I heard it strike some solid object at the bottom.

'It doesn't look like a disused well, sir,' I suggested. 'At all events

there's no water in it. Shall I go down and have a look?'

'I should be very glad if you would,' replied the Professor.

I unwound my coil of rope, which I had been carrying over my shoulder all this time, and made fast one end to the strongest-looking of the fencing posts. The other end I lowered into the pit, and was relieved to find that it touched bottom before it had all passed through my hands.

'It's barely fifty feet deep,' I remarked. 'I can manage to climb in and out of that quite easily.'

The Professor handed me his torch, which I put in my trousers pocket. I had taken off my coat and waistcoat and rolled up my sleeves. 'Here goes!' I exclaimed, and without further ado lowered myself into the hole and began to go down, hand over hand.

The descent was easy. The width of the pit increased with its depth, so that the rope hung clear of the walls. There was no suggestion of dampness, the place seemed as dry as a bone. In a surprisingly short time my feet touched bottom. I took the torch out of my pocket, and examined the place in which I was standing.

I found myself in a sort of cave, hewn out of the solid chalk. The rough walls were rounded with age, and the chalk was no longer white, but overgrown with some dark green mould, as in a long-disused quarry. The cave was approximately circular, perhaps a dozen feet in diameter, and from the centre of the roof the shaft ascended straight up to the ground level.

I shouted these details up to the Professor, who was standing on the edge of the pit, and I could tell by the interested tone of his reply that the results of my exploration gratified him.

'It is certainly a dene-hole,' he called down. 'Examine the place thoroughly, my boy, especially for worked flints, or other signs of early human occupation. But be quite certain that the air is fit to breathe.'

I lit a match and held it up. The flame burnt steadily and luminously. Only when I put it close to the floor of the cave did it flicker and die out.

'The air's all right, sir,' I shouted reassuringly. 'There seems to be

a little carbon dioxide on the floor, but not much.'

'Chalk—calcium carbonate—certain to be a little gas,' I heard the Professor say. 'Do not bend down more than you can help. It's apt to be sudden in its effects—'

But I lost the end of the sentence, astounded by a new and surprising discovery. I had been throwing the rays of the torch foot by foot over the floor of the cave as I spoke, and they now rested on some large angular object. I walked up to this, and kicked it negligently. It sounded wooden and hollow. The light of the Professor's most excellent torch revealed its nature.

'Why, good Lord, it's a packing case!' I exclaimed aloud.

'What? What's that? Have you found something?' called the Professor excitedly.

'Nothing very thrilling, I'm afraid, sir,' I replied. 'Only rather a queer thing to come across in a place like this. It's an old wooden box, looks like a packing case of some kind.'

'Packing case! Of course, of course, I begin to see now. How big is it?' The Professor's voice was almost tinged with anxiety.

'How big?' I repeated carelessly. 'Oh, about three foot six long, three foot wide, and a couple of feet deep. Hullo, here's the lid!'

'Don't touch it!' shouted the Professor quickly. 'Is it attached to the case?'

'No, sir,' I replied. 'It's lying a couple of yards or so from it.'

'And the case itself? Is it under the bottom of the shaft?'

'Very nearly, sir. It's lying on its side. The wood round one of the corners is pretty badly splintered. It looks as if it had been chucked down here out of the way.'

'Put the lid on the case and tie your end of the rope round both,' said the Professor. I looked up the shaft and saw the outline of his head against the sky. He was evidently lying on the ground looking over. Even then I could not understand his interest in this empty and forgotten box.

However, I obeyed him, and made the rope fast round it. As I did so, I noticed that the box was much lighter than its size had led me to expect.

'All fast, sir,' I called out. 'Shall I climb up and haul it out for you?'

'No, no, I can manage that,' replied the Professor eagerly. 'You stay down there a little longer, and examine the floor of the cave very carefully with the torch. Call up to me if you find anything.'

The rope tautened, and the box began to ascend the shaft. I turned the rays of the lamp on to the floor, and then to the walls, but my search revealed nothing beyond a few dead leaves and a stick or two, evidently debris from above.

'Can't see anything else, sir,' I called. 'The place seems as empty as a drum.'

But there was no reply. The Professor had evidently moved away from the mouth of the shaft, out of range of my voice. I waited for several minutes before I heard any sound from above.

Then, after what seemed to me a long time, I heard the Professor's voice again, sharp and decisive.

'Stand clear of the shaft,' he said, 'I am about to throw the rope down again. Have you found anything fresh?'

'No, sir,' I replied. 'I've searched pretty thoroughly, too.'

'Very well, then. Come out and assist me to examine this highly significant discovery of yours. It explains the whole thing—'

The end of the rope fell with a thud upon the floor of the cave, and I began to climb it, slowly and methodically. By the time I reached daylight, I was somewhat out of breath, but none the worse for my archaeological adventure.

The Professor helped me out, and patted me on the shoulder appreciatively. 'Well done, my boy!' he exclaimed. 'The co-ordination of your muscle and my brain has brought to light a whole series of most instructive facts. I have conveyed the packing case under cover of the trees, as I do not wish to be disturbed by prying eyes while we examine it.'

So the old boy had carried our find into the wood by himself! I smiled at the thought. What on earth could there be about it to intrigue him to such an extent? I followed him, still wondering.

'There you are!' he exclaimed triumphantly. 'Now examine it

carefully and tell me what you see. Facts, my boy, facts only.' I turned the case over and looked at it very carefully. "It seems to be a remarkably well-made case," I said at last. "It must have been made to hold goods of rather a special kind. In the first place, the wood it is made of is planed all over, instead of being rough, as is usual. The wood itself is remarkably light, but very strong, nothing like the ordinary unseasoned stuff packing cases are usually made of. Then again, instead of being fastened together with ordinary nails, brass screws have been used, even for fastening the lid. Here are two of them still sticking in it.'

'Exactly,' replied the Professor. 'A remarkable case in every way. Yet you found it at the bottom of the dene-hole?'

'I did sir, and it had evidently been thrown down there. You can see where this corner has been splintered by the fall.'

'A very curious place to select for its disposal,' commented the Professor. 'One would imagine that such a well-made case would be worth keeping, if only for firewood. Still, if the goods it contained were unpacked on or near this spot, it was the simplest way of getting rid of it.'

'But it can't have been unpacked here, sir!' I exclaimed. 'Unless it held agricultural machinery or something like that, and that sort of thing isn't put into a box like this.'

'And yet I fancy it was unpacked within a few yards of where we are standing,' replied the Professor quietly. 'I have verified your estimate of its measurements, roughly three feet six inches by three feet by two. Can you offer any suggestions as to its contents? Look inside carefully.'

Thus bidden, I examined the inside of the case more carefully than I had done yet. Suddenly I uttered an exclamation of surprise. In one corner of the case, where the wood had not been so carefully planed as elsewhere, a considerable number of iron-grey hairs had caught in the roughness of the surface.

'That's queer, sir,' I said. 'Those look remarkably like human hairs.'

The Professor sat down upon the overturned box, and began in

his best lecture-room manner.

'You will doubtless recall that I have often said, that when it was necessary to establish theories from conjecture alone, it is necessary to subject such theories to the test of fact. Now let us state a conjecture-theory for the presence of this case at the bottom of a dene-hole, within a few yards of the spot where Mr. Austin's body was found. I have never been satisfied that he was actually murdered here; the evidence for such an assumption is most unconvincing. Let us suppose that Mr. Austin was murdered, not on the night previous to the finding of the body, but on the night before that.

If you will study your notes of Mr. Gerald's first visit to us, you will see that he mentions the fact that his brother's body was found doubled up on the ground. This is in itself curious, for in nearly every case of death by violence, the body is found stretched out, unless some reason, such as constriction of space, prevents this, and no such reason exists here. Now we know that Mr. Austin was a big, powerful man. The dimensions of this case are such that a body of the size of Mr. Austin's could be forced into it, and the body would then assume a posture which might be described as "doubled up."

'But who can have put Mr. Austin into the box and taken him out of it again, between the time he was seen at the station and the time the body was found?' I objected.

'You miss my whole point,' replied the Professor testily. 'According to my theory, it was not Mr. Austin who was seen at the station, but someone impersonating him, someone sufficiently of his height and build to make such impersonation possible, at all events to casual eyes. Now, we have no knowledge of Mr. Austin's movements from the time he saw Mr. Withers until his body was found here. He may have met his death shortly after his visit to Mr. Withers, that is to say, on October 11th. Someone concerned with his death may have put the body into this box. According to the description I have of the dead man, he had iron-grey hair, which he was apt to allow to grow rather long. I cannot, of course, prove that these hairs are Mr. Austin's, but it is at least possible that they are.'

'But how in the world did the box, with Mr. Austin in it, get here?' I

exclaimed.

'How did Mr. Gerald's body get to Hilton Pennings?' replied the Professor.

'In a car of some kind, the one that nearly ran over me, sir, I imagine.'

'Well, then, if you accept that as a probability, it is equally safe to conjecture that this box was brought here in a motor-vehicle of some kind. I allow myself to conjecture that this was approximately the course of events. Mr. Austin was murdered on the 11th. During the course of the following night his body was brought here in this box. I have examined the locality, and I observe that the main road curves round the meadow in which the dene-hole is situated, so that the shaft can be reached from the road by walking scarcely more than a hundred yards across the meadow.

'I imagine that, in the course of the night of the 11th, the box was brought here and lowered into the dene-hole. On the following evening, the impersonator of Mr. Austin, having taken the necessary steps to establish a belief that Mr. Austin was still alive, travelled down here by the last train, and walked through Horn's Lane to the clearing. He then passed through the wood to the dene-hole, and, either by himself or with the aid of accomplices who met him there, hauled up the box, extracted the body of Mr. Austin, deposited it in the clearing, and threw the box back into the dene-hole. It only remained to trample down the surrounding grass to produce the illusion of a struggle having taken place, and the suggestion that the murder had taken place on the spot during the night of the 12th was complete.'

'But why do you think that, the box was brought here during the night of the 11th, sir?' I remarked.

'Because you found it at the bottom of the dene-hole,' replied the Professor. 'I assume that the box was brought down by road, in the first place. Now, if the vehicle which brought it had been here when the box was unpacked, it would have been more natural for the murderer to have taken it away with him. The box in itself is a

valuable clue, and it would have been contrary to the amazing skill with which the crime was planned to leave it anywhere where it ran the risk of discovery. As this was not possible, the next best thing was to throw it down the shaft of the dene-hole. The murderer considered the probability of it remaining undisturbed. Perhaps even he intended, or still intends, to remove it at some favourable opportunity. But from its presence where you found it, I infer that no transport was available on the night of the 12th by which to remove it. It is a fair deduction that it was brought here on the night of the 11th.'

'But why go to all this trouble, sir? Surely it would have been simpler to have left the body, box and all, at the bottom of the pit. The crime had already been committed and the body disposed of. Why bring it to light again?'

'In order, first, that the death of Mr. Austin should be established, and that he should not merely be considered as missing, and second, to suggest a false theory of the time and place of his death. The police were convinced that Mr. Austin was murdered in Horn's Lane at about half-past ten on the night of the 12th. No doubt the criminal has established a conclusive alibi for that time. I expect that he returned and took the body from the box as late as he dared on the morning of the 13th. If it was indeed the actual criminal who impersonated Mr. Austin on the evening of the 12th, he probably took good care to impersonate himself, so to speak, elsewhere.'

'It is almost exactly similar to the circumstances surrounding the murder of Mr. Gerald!' I exclaimed. 'The car the box was brought in, the care taken to leave the body where it must be found, the actual spot emphasised in an anonymous warning.'

'Exactly,' replied the Professor. 'Observe, also, that whoever planned the crime must have had a remarkable knowledge of local topography. He knew of the existence of the dene-hole, and he must have explored Horn's Lane pretty thoroughly. We have already deduced that he was familiar with Mr. Austin's habits and character. It is, I think, safe to infer that he must at some time have stayed with

him. Further, if we admit the theory that he impersonated Mr. Austin, we know that he was a man over the average size and build.'

'What sort of a man is Mr. Withers to look at, sir?' I asked quickly.

The Professor rose from his seat on the packing case. 'That you will have an opportunity of judging for yourself when we return to London to-morrow,' he replied. 'Now I think it is time to return to the Bull's Head for lunch.'

'But what about this box, sir?' I exclaimed. 'You aren't going to leave it lying here, surely?'

The Professor considered for a moment. 'I suppose we ought to give Inspector Hanslet the chance of seeing it,' he replied slowly. 'I promised to place any information I might obtain at his disposal. Yet we cannot very well carry it to the village with us. It would attract too much attention.'

'I know, sir!' I exclaimed. 'Let's throw it back where we found it.'

The Professor smiled. 'An excellent suggestion! I will notify Inspector Hanslet of its whereabouts and he can examine it at his leisure.'

I picked up the case, carried it to the edge of the pit, and threw it down. It fell with a dull crash, and I flung the rope after it. Then I rejoined the Professor, and the pair of us walked back to our well-earned lunch.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MR. WITHERS

WE returned to London next morning, and that afternoon the Professor and I took the tube to the Bank, for the purpose of calling upon Mr. Withers. I had already been cautioned to say nothing, but to listen to the conversation and use my power of observation.

We walked up Coleman Street, entered the building in which Mr. Withers' office was situated, and entered a door marked 'Enquiries.' A clerk seated at a desk took our names and disappeared through a

second door. After a minute or two he reappeared. Yes, Mr. Withers would be delighted to see us. Would we step this way? We did so, and found ourselves in a large but rather dingy room, lined with piles of tin boxes and bookcases containing stout and formidable volumes. It was, in fact, a typical lawyer's office.

But it was the man and not the room I had come to see. Mr. Withers rose at our entry, and I had an excellent opportunity for observing him. He was of middle age—I put him a year or two on the right side of fifty—with rather a florid face and ungainly limbs. It struck me that he had acquired a certain heaviness, apparently from sedentary work and good living. I stand roughly at six foot myself, and our eyes were on a level as we shook hands. I noticed that his hand was flabby and apparently nerveless, the hand of a strongly-built man who has allowed his muscles to run to fat. Not that he was unduly stout in appearance; his naturally large build saved him from that.

The Professor and I sat down in a couple of chairs in front of Mr. Withers' desk, and after greetings had been duly exchanged, the Professor opened the conversation.

'The death of Mr. Gerald Heatherdale has naturally re-awakened my interest in that of his brother,' he said. 'I have taken the liberty of calling upon you to see if you can give me any information as to his movements after he saw you on October 10th.'

It struck me that a suspicion of a frown crossed Mr. Withers' face. 'Of course, all this ground has been covered before,' he replied. 'Still, I will tell you what I can. Mr. Austin called here during the afternoon of that day. We transacted certain legal business, the nature of which was purely a matter of routine. Before we parted, he told me that he was returning to White Pelham two days later, and that he had asked Mr. Gerald to meet him there. There were certain family matters upon which a decision was required, and the two brothers had arranged a meeting for the purpose. Mr. Austin asked me if I would come down, too, but I was unable to accept. I had engagements during the whole of that week which I was unable to put off.'

'Even after business hours?' suggested the Professor quietly.

Mr. Withers smiled condescendingly. 'We lawyers have, unfortunately, no limits to our hours of business,' he replied. 'It is frequently necessary for us to visit our clients when the routine work of the day is over. I should very much have enjoyed a visit to White Pelham, but there were other claims upon my time which I could not forgo.'

The Professor nodded. 'I see. Then you have no knowledge of how Mr. Austin intended to spend the forty-eight hours following his visit to you?'

'None whatever,' replied Mr. Withers emphatically. 'Beyond the remark that he was not returning to White Pelham until the next day but one, he made no reference to the matter. He was in the habit of paying periodic visits to London, and staying two or three days at a time.'

'He is said to have received a telegram at his hotel, the day after seeing you,' said the Professor. 'Can you form any theory as to the sender?'

Mr. Withers shrugged his shoulders. 'I am afraid I cannot,' he replied. 'No doubt it was sent by somebody whom he previously informed that he would be at the hotel on that date.'

'Does it not strike you as rather curious that, in view of the publicity given in the newspapers to Mr. Austin's death, the sender of that telegram did not come forward at the time?'

It struck me at the time that there was a distinct note of accusation in the Professor's tone. Mr. Withers also must have detected something, for his reply was noticeably less genial than his previous conversation had been.

'That seems to me to be a matter within the province of the police, Dr. Priestley,' he said. 'I'm afraid that I cannot lend myself to hypothetical conjectures so long after the event. Nor do I see the importance of the point, if I may say so.'

'But surely it would be of the greatest importance if it could be shown that Mr. Austin was murdered on the afternoon of the 11th, the day on which he received that telegram?' insisted the Professor.

This time Mr. Withers nearly started out of his chair. 'What on earth do you mean?' he exclaimed. 'Why, he is known to have travelled to White Pelham by the 8.5 train on the evening of the 12th!'

The Professor waved his hand deprecatingly. 'I was only endeavouring to point out that, under certain circumstances, it might be of vital importance to discover the sender of that telegram,' he explained. 'It is a point which, I think, should certainly have been investigated at the time.'

He drew out his watch and glanced at it. 'Dear me, I fear that I have wasted more of your time than I intended,' he continued. 'My excuse is that I hoped to obtain some clue as to Mr. Austin's movements after he saw you.'

'I am sorry I cannot help you,' replied Mr. Withers. 'Of course, if at any time I can be of assistance, you will not hesitate to ask me.'

'Then perhaps you will forgive one further question. You have, I imagine, communicated the news of Mr. Gerald's death to Dr. Heatherdale in New Zealand, who is, I understand, the heir to the estate?'

'I have cabled, and have also written to him the full facts of the case, asking him, if possible, to come to England. I have naturally much business to transact with him.'

'Thank you, Mr. Withers. I shall, perhaps, ask you to arrange a meeting between us, should he accede to your request. Now we will no longer trespass upon your patience.'

We returned to Westbourne Terrace, and the Professor lost no time in pursuing the subject.

'You see the trend of my remarks,' he began. 'Among a mass of inconclusive evidence, we can detect the probability that Mr. Austin actually returned to his hotel and received a telegram. Now, while it was accepted as a fact that Mr. Austin was alive on the evening of the 12th, his actions up to that time were considered of secondary importance. If, however, he was murdered on the 11th, every detail of his actions after his departure from Mr. Withers' office becomes of the utmost importance.'

'But if you're right about that box we found, sir, it all fits in,' I

interrupted. 'You showed that the author of the crime must be a man approximating to Mr. Austin's height and build. Mr. Withers seems to me to fit that bill exactly. Very well, he or one of his confederates sent Mr. Austin a telegram, asking him to meet him somewhere that afternoon. Mr. Austin complies, is murdered, and the rest happens exactly as you have explained. It seems to me that the case is almost complete.'

The Professor made no reply for a long time. He sat with his elbows on his desk and his head in his hands, an attitude which I knew betokened intense thought. Then he suddenly rose and stood with his back to the fire, looking down upon me as I sat in my chair.

'You have followed my line of reasoning closely, Harold, my boy,' he said gravely. 'I will not say that you have exactly reached the same conclusions as I have. Your experience of mathematical logic, of the true and relentless significance of every verified fact, is not yet as great as mine. The case is complete, as you say, as complete as any theory based upon deduction can be. I am fully satisfied as to the facts of the murder of both Mr. Austin and Mr. Gerald Heatherdale. But I regard the matter from the point of view of the logician alone. From the point of view of justice, of the policeman, the matter is still as obscure as ever. What evidence—evidence, that is, that could be put before a jury—is there of the complicity of any single individual in either murder? I could not enter the witness-box and prove mathematically by elimination that only one single person could have done the deed. In the eyes of the law a demonstration that a man must have performed a given action is no evidence that he did so perform it. And in this particular case, or rather, these particular cases—for I know that one man actually committed both murders—my theory is so utterly opposed to the circumstances as imagined by the police that I could not even obtain a hearing.'

'But I am pretty sure that Inspector Hanslet already has suspicions regarding Mr. Withers, sir,' I said.

The Professor smiled. 'Exactly,' he replied. 'Which is a proof that he regards the matter much as I do. His suspicions are so strong

that, if he had a shred of evidence which he thought would stand the test of a trial, he would have applied for a warrant for his arrest days ago. I repeat that mathematical evidence and legal evidence are two entirely different things. I am satisfied in my own mind; perhaps Inspector Hanslet is satisfied in his. But, whereas I am merely a private observer, a mathematician who solves a problem for its own sake, he is a servant of the public, whose duty it is to bring criminals to justice. He is bound to continue his investigation until he has built up a case which he can bring into court. That is, after all, the whole duty of a detective.'

'But what are you going to do, sir?' I enquired. The Professor's attitude of logical satisfaction did not appeal to me at all. I wanted to see Mr. Withers brought to book, and that with the least possible delay.

'I shall, of course, lay all the information I possess at the disposal of Inspector Hanslet,' replied the Professor quietly. 'It is for him to decide upon the next step. I shall not unfold to him the theory I have formed in my own mind at this stage. I do not think that he is yet prepared to appreciate the finer points of my argument. The preconceived theory is the worst enemy of any investigator. Human nature is far too prone to build upon the sand. The great majority of us are blinded by appearances. We construct a theory upon certain preconceived facts, and if a subsequent fact will not fit in with that theory, we reject the fact, instead of constructing a new theory. For that reason I will confine myself to facts in discussing this matter with Inspector Hanslet.'

The opportunity for this discussion arrived sooner than might have been expected, for Hanslet came round that very evening. I was out when he arrived, the Professor having sent me in search for material for his much-interrupted book, but I returned to find the two of them comfortably installed in the study.

'Well, all that is very interesting, Professor,' Hanslet was saying. 'But I don't think it had any bearing on Mr. Austin's murder. You can't say that, because a packing case is found at the bottom of an old well, the considered verdict of a coroner's jury must be upset.'

Why, my people at the Yard would think I had gone mad if I suggested such a thing. No, we've got to get at the bottom of this thing from the other end, from the murder of Mr. Gerald, I mean. And I'm blest if I can find the smallest thing which would justify me in applying for a warrant.'

'You have discovered nothing new, I infer?' said the Professor.

'Nothing whatever!' exclaimed Hanslet emphatically. 'I've had Allingford and the neighbourhood gone over with a fine-toothed comb, and there's nothing, absolutely nothing, that one can lay hands on. I've had to be awfully careful with Withers, of course. I don't want him to imagine that there's the least suspicion attaching to him. In fact, I don't want his name mentioned in connection with the case.'

This with a glance at the Professor and me.

'You may rest assured of our discretion,' replied the Professor gravely.

Thus reassured, Hanslet unbent somewhat. 'He *must* be at the bottom of it, he and Mrs. Milton, though I'm bothered if I can see how to bring it home to them. They're the only people who stood to gain by Mr. Gerald's death, if we except this distant relative in New Zealand. I don't see how the devil he can have had anything to do with it, directly, that is. Of course, there may have been collusion between the three of them for all I know. Perhaps they've agreed to divide the spoils somehow. I shall have to see this Doctor Heatherdale when he comes to England. Withers tells me he's sent for him.'

'Mr. Withers told you that, did he?' enquired the Professor.

'Oh, yes, that and a lot more, how the estate was divided, and all that sort of thing. He's a plausible devil, volunteers information without being asked for it. I didn't want to say anything which might lead him to believe I had any suspicions, but he told me quite casually that he had been out of town on the night of the crime. Out of town! I should damn well think he had!'

'Did he say where he had been?'

Inspector Hanslet laughed shortly.

'That's the cream of the jest,' he replied. 'He told me, bold as brass, that he had spent the night at Walthamstow, in the house of a married sister of Mrs. Milton and her husband. Now, as far as I can make out, it seems true enough that Mrs. Milton has a married sister at Walthamstow. But you see my position. If I start making enquiries, Withers will learn at once that I am on his track. What's more, this precious sister is probably in the game, too, and she'll swear black and blue that he was there all night. Oh, it's a wonderful alibi. I don't wonder that he came out with it so pat.'

Hanslet flung his cigarette end savagely into the fire, and sat for some minutes in moody silence. 'I don't think there's much else,' he said at last. 'Except that the consul at Marseilles sent us Captain Murchison's statement. It doesn't tell us anything that we don't know already. Murchison wrote to Mr. Gerald, telling him that he would be in Bristol the whole of the Wednesday afternoon and evening. If Mr. Gerald cared to come down then, and would send a telegram to the Royal Hotel, Murchison promised to meet him and take him to the ship at Avonmouth. In any case, Murchison told him that he was sailing at noon on Thursday, and asked him, if he did not come down on Wednesday afternoon, to come straight to Avonmouth as early as possible on Thursday morning. I had enquiries made at the Royal, and found out that no telegram arrived there, but that Murchison came in twice and asked for one. The consul also says that, on hearing of the death of Mr. Gerald, Murchison seemed very much affected. Later in the day he sent ashore a big trunk, which he said belonged to Mr. Gerald, for transmission to Allingford House. I'm going to intercept that trunk and have a look at it. It's just possible that it may contain a clue to the mystery.'

'How?' I remarked, incautiously.

Inspector Hanslet scowled at me in reply. 'Can't say till I've opened it,' he snapped. 'What I can't make out is what induced Mr. Gerald to go to Allingford at all. Of course, he may have wanted to pick something up. But why on earth didn't he wire to Murchison, as he was asked to do, or, for that matter, why didn't he let them know at Allingford that he was coming? I'd give a lot to know whom

he saw in London on Wednesday. I can guess what happened, but my trouble is that I can't prove it.'

'May we hear your theory, Inspector?' asked the Professor quietly.

'Certainly, as long as you don't breathe a word outside this room. I fancy that Mr. Gerald got it into his head that he ought to do some legal business or other before he sailed, make a new will, or something like that. He decided to do this at Allingford, perhaps because all his papers were there. He didn't want to leave London until he heard from Murchison as to when he was to embark, so he told Withers to go down in the morning, get everything ready, and meet him by the 9.42 at Pirton, with a car to drive him to Allingford House. That would account for everything but his failure to wire Murchison. As soon as he got Murchison's letter he knew he had the Thursday morning to get from Allingford to Avonmouth, not a very great distance.

'Now, it is a curious fact that Withers was not at his office after eleven o'clock on this Wednesday. I managed to discover that he came in, opened his letters, and went out, saying that he would not be back that day. Unfortunately, this does not carry us much further. I found out that Mr. Withers is in the habit of taking Wednesday off whenever he is not very busy. He goes and plays a round or two of golf. You see now what must have happened. Withers opens Mr. Gerald's letter and sees his opportunity. He gets hold of a car drives down to Allingford, and waits for Mr. Gerald outside Pirton station. The rest is as clear as daylight.'

'It is an ingenious theory, certainly,' replied the Professor slowly. 'But what do you imagine happened to the car after Harold saw it disappear in the direction of East Kennett?' Inspector Hanslet winked significantly 'That is where I mean to have him,' he replied confidently. 'I am having enquiries made as to the movements of every likely car on that evening. It takes time, of course, but we are bound to pick up some information sooner or later. Take it from me, Professor, I shall hit on the very piece of evidence I want, one of these days

when we least expect it.

The Professor merely nodded, and it was not until Hanslet was gone that he replied to his veiled challenge.

'Inspector Hanslet sees the wisdom of waiting his opportunity before acting, as I inferred he would,' he remarked. 'His theory is highly ingenious, but unfortunately it is at present incapable of proof, mainly because it is built up of assumptions instead of facts. Well, we shall see what proofs fall into Inspector Hanslet's hands. Perhaps, after all, the opportunity to demonstrate the truth may occur to me rather than to him.'

'What do you mean, sir?' I enquired eagerly. 'Have you discovered any definite proof of Mr. Withers' guilt?'

But the Professor merely shook his head. 'There is so much that is inexplicable in this whole matter that I prefer to await developments before committing myself any further,' he said. 'The main details of these two crimes are as clear to me as logical deductions can make them. And yet, in certain respects, the truth is so strange that it appears to be self-contradictory. No, before we can carry investigations any further, before Hanslet or I can translate our suspicions into action, we must await a further step on the part of the criminal.'

And that was all that the Professor could be induced to say. From that evening he appeared to dismiss the whole affair from his mind. If he referred to it at all, it was merely with a gesture of irritation, as an unwelcome interruption of the work that he was engaged upon. It seemed almost as if he wished to forget about it, and to make me do the same. For the next few weeks, indeed until the first promise of spring was in the air, we put in ten hours a day of solid research work, and devoted our leisure to the Professor's somewhat original correspondence. He was known among a small but distinguished circle as a solver of problems on mathematical lines, and he took a delight in dictating long, involved, and often shattering replies to his various correspondents. I believe that quarto sheets in the Professor's verbiage and my handwriting could be found among the papers of most of the leading scientists of the day.

But I never let the murder of the two Heatherdales pass entirely out of my mind. I shared Hanslet's opinion that Mr. Withers must be guilty, if not of committing the crimes himself, at least of complicity in them. But I could not adopt the Professor's attitude of philosophical content. To him the attraction of a problem lay in the solving of it; it was immaterial to him what results this solution might have or to whom it was known. The intellectual exercise the solution afforded him was sufficient to satisfy him. Justice was all very well in its way, but it lay entirely outside his plane of thought. Justice, as he once told me, was a matter of legal formulae rather than of mathematical logic, and did not, therefore, interest him. I had very little hope of hearing more of the matter from the Professor.

I was none the less delighted to receive a letter from Captain Murchison, one morning in the middle of March. It bore the house-flag of *the Brackenthorpe Manor*, now so familiar to me, and contained a brief intimation that the vessel was lying in the Royal Albert Dock, having just returned from her Mediterranean voyage. If I could spare the time to come down for an hour's chat, Captain Murchison would be delighted to see me.

'Yes, go by all means, my boy,' said the Professor when I showed him the letter. 'You have been working very hard lately, and a change of occupation will do you good. I am anxious to do some quiet reading to-day, and can consequently dispense with your presence for a few hours.'

'Then I will go down to the docks straight away, sir,' I replied. 'Can I give Captain Murchison any message from you?'

'You can, of course, sympathise with him on the loss he has sustained by the death of the two brothers,' said the Professor. 'Yes, and by the way, you might ask him, casually, why the *Brackenthorpe Manor* called at Avonmouth on her outward journey. Whether it was to load cargo, or merely to pick up Mr. Gerald Heatherdale. And if it was to load cargo, the nature of the cargo shipped, and if possible the consignors.'

I promised to find out, if I could, and set off on my journey

eastward. I found the *Brackenthorpe Manor* busy unloading, and Captain Murchison enjoying his morning cigar on the bridge.

He welcomed me with a firm pressure of his powerful hand, and took me into his cabin.

'I'm very glad you found time to come down here, Mr. Merefield,' he said. 'The truth is that I've got to see that lawyer fellow, Withers, about the ownership of this vessel, and I want to hear the whole story of Mr. Gerald's death before I go. Who the devil can have had any interest in murdering the poor fellow? You can guess what it means to me.'

'I know,' I replied. 'It's rotten luck on you. I've been wondering ever since it happened how you're going to carry on.'

Captain Murchison's eyes hardened. "I'll carry on somehow, even though it breaks me, as it's bound to do in a year or two. I dare say I could find some way out of it, but I won't. The old man meant well by me, he could not be expected to guess that his two sons would die before I should. I was to carry out his dearest wish, and in return the old ship was to be my livelihood. And I'll not fail him while I've the means to carry on. By God, I won't!"

He sat quite still, staring straight in front of him, and then continued in a milder tone.

'I don't suppose you understand, any of you landsmen. The old man loved the vessel, believed in her as a man believes in one woman, sooner or later. He had made her, she was the creation of his years of experience, she was to justify him and his faith. He made me see it all that day she ran her trials, sitting here in this very cabin. "And you're the man to run her, Murchison" he said. "We'll show 'em a thing or two, eh?" I promised him, and I'm not going to slide out of my promise now. I'll have to see this lawyer fellow, and see if there's any chance of getting help from this New Zealand man that the money goes to. It isn't that the vessel wants subsidising, but she must have capital from time to time if she's to pay her way. But that's my affair, and I mustn't worry you with it. Now tell me all you know about Mr. Gerald's death.'

I sat in his most comfortable arm-chair and told him the whole

story, from the time of my seeing the car pass me at Hilton Pennings to the inquest. Captain Murchison listened intently, putting in a question here and there to elucidate some detail. When I had finished, he smoked for some minutes in silence, deep in thought.

'Well, and who do they imagine did it?' he asked at last. 'I suppose the police have some theory? They usually get on the track of some clue or other.'

'The police are pretty reticent,' I replied. I was sorely tempted to tell the skipper that Hanslet was lying in wait for Withers to make a false move of some kind, but remembering the undertaking I had given, I refrained.

'Reticent, are they?' said Murchison. 'Sure sign they don't know anything, I expect. And what about you and this Professor of yours? What do you make of it all?'

'Look here, Captain, I can't give away things I've been told in confidence,' I said. 'But put it this way. Who stands to make most out of the death of these two Heatherdales?'

'Why, the Johnny in New Zealand, of course,' replied Murchison. 'At least, he's still in New Zealand, I suppose. But how the devil a man in New Zealand can murder two other men in England, I can't see.'

'There are other people who stand to gain, at least by Mr. Gerald's death,' I suggested. 'One of them is Mrs. Milton, his housekeeper. She has been left the house and a good round sum to keep it up with. And, between you and me, Mr. Withers isn't a loser either.'

Murchison looked at me and whistled softly. 'Oh, so that's the way the land lies, is it?' he replied. 'Thanks for the tip. I'll be very careful what I say when I see Withers. By Gad, I wouldn't be sorry to see him laid by the heels. I've never liked him. But you needn't be afraid I'll say a word of what you've told me.'

We chatted for some time longer. I learnt that, as soon as the *Brackenthorpe Manor* had discharged her cargo, she was bound for New Orleans with a general cargo, and was to bring back cotton to Liverpool. 'And after that, we'll have to put her into dock for a few weeks. Machinery wants overhaul. That's where the money goes,

you know.' And Captain Murchison frowned gloomily.

'Well, perhaps you'll find Dr. Heatherdale sympathetic when he gets over here,' I said. 'He's morally, if not legally, bound to carry out his benefactor's wishes. I'd see him myself, if I were you, and not leave it to Withers.'

'I'd hang Withers myself, if I knew he was responsible for all this trouble,' muttered Murchison. "I'll drop you a line when we get back to Liverpool. Perhaps you'll come and spend a night on board.'

'I'd love to,' I replied enthusiastically. 'Oh, by the way, there was one thing I wanted to ask you. Did you put into Avonmouth this last trip on purpose to pick up Mr. Gerald?'

'Oh, lord, no,' replied Murchison with a laugh. 'A tramp steamer isn't like a yacht, putting in to fancy ports to pick up owners. No, I had a cargo waiting for me, tractors and motor vans for Salonica. We hoisted them aboard the last thing on the morning we sailed. They came by road from Bristol where they were made. Cheap transit, you see.'

We shook hands once more, and I returned to Westbourne Terrace, where I found the Professor firmly entrenched behind a breastwork of dusty volumes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FIRE AT SEA

I GAVE the Professor an account of my interview with Captain Murchison, to which he listened attentively. When I had finished, he nodded, from which I inferred that he approved of my information.

'Captain Murchison certainly faces his misfortunes stoically,' he remarked. 'Perhaps, if the position is explained to this Dr. Heatherdale, of whom we know so little, he will be prepared to enter into some sort of partnership in the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. It would be interesting to suggest such a course to him, very interesting—'

The Professor indulged his train of thought for a few seconds, then turned to me abruptly.

'You did not learn the name of the consignors of the cargo that the *Brackenthorpe Manor* took on board at Avonmouth?' he asked.

'No, sir. I didn't,' I replied. 'I didn't want to press the matter too closely.'

'Quite right, quite right. Well, now we know its nature we shall find no difficulty in discovering the consignors, should such a step become necessary.'

What interest the Professor had in the details I could not imagine. 'Do you think that Mr. Withers had something to do with this cargo, sir?' I ventured.

'You should know by this time that I do not indulge in conjecture,' replied the Professor testily. 'Now we have plenty of work before us, and we will begin without further waste of time. I have a series of notes here—'

And that was all that I could get out of him. Nor, during the weeks that followed, did he once allude, in my hearing at least, to the murder of the Heatherdale brothers. A stranger might have believed that he had wiped the whole matter from his mind. But I knew better; I knew that, once he had embarked upon a problem, he never abandoned it until the solution was in sight. That in this particular case the solution was already perfectly clear to him, I never doubted. I could guess at the broad outlines of it, but many of the details still puzzled me. The directing motive seemed plain enough, but what tools had been employed? That one man, even though aided by one woman, could have accomplished both deeds, seemed almost incredible. Yet, had they employed accessories, surely the large rewards that had been offered would tempt one or other to a confession? Was this what the Professor and Hanslet were waiting for?

For it was quite obvious to me that they were waiting, the Professor in the spirit of the mathematician anxious to demonstrate the correctness of his theory, Hanslet as a bird of prey waiting to

pounce on his victim. Hanslet came to see the Professor more than once during this period, ostensibly to seek advice upon the various problems that came his way. But his complete abandonment of the Heatherdale case was a trifle too ostentatious to impose upon me. I guessed that he wished to convey the impression that the case was dead and buried, in order to lure the criminals into taking some false step which would supply him with the evidence he needed.

This apparently passive waiting was a favourite theme with the Professor.

'Time is an essential factor in every problem,' I heard him say once. 'It is very rarely that all the relevant facts are available at the same moment. It is possible, scientifically speaking, to arrange a series of facts, and from the result to predict the existence of other facts, at present missing from the series. But, of course, until those facts are discovered, the proof is incomplete. The classical example of such scientific prediction is, of course, the Periodic law. Mendeleef, by careful study of the elements known in his lifetime, confidently asserted that certain others remained to be discovered, and even foretold the nature of these then unknown elements. Modern science has succeeded in verifying his predictions, with perhaps one or two exceptions, and the elements he deduced theoretically are now the commonplaces of chemistry.'

'The analogy is valuable in the consideration of any human problem. The investigator who relies upon facts and eschews conjecture can confidently predict the existence of other facts, as yet unknown. Frequently these facts are very carefully hidden; they may be known to one person alone, and it may be in the vital interest of that individual to keep them concealed. But once the certainty that such facts exist has been scientifically arrived at in the mind of the investigator, he will be able to build up the shreds of evidence that time reveals into irrefutable proof. If, for instance, I know by scientific deduction that Mr. Jones *must* have been in Birmingham on July 5th last, it is equally certain that, given time and careful observation of everything that concerns the matter, I shall eventually be able to prove that he actually was there, although motive, ap-

parent probability, the testimony of undoubtedly sincere witnesses, and every other conceivable factor, all declare that he was in Timbuctoo.'

'You'd have a job to convince a jury of it, all the same, Professor,' muttered Hanslet, for whose benefit this theory had been elaborated.

'Exactly. That is one of the divergences between justice and science,' replied the Professor acidly. 'I imagine that in such a case the only proof that would be accepted in a court of law would be Mr. Jones' own confession that he was in Birmingham and not Timbuctoo. But that does not affect the truth of my contention.'

I must confess that such an acceptance of the situation dissatisfied me. I felt that, if I had been Hanslet, I should have gambled on the throw, arrested this Mr. Withers, and trusted my ability to rush him into some sort of an admission which would enable me to complete the case against him. And even now I am convinced that Hanslet often thought the same, and that it was only his deep respect for the Professor's wisdom that restrained him.

So, in this state of concealed tension, the matter remained for some couple of months after my visit to Captain Murchison. I confess that the thing which now interested me most in connection with the Heatherdale case was the future of this sturdy skipper and his ship. In my eyes these became the central figures. After all, if the murder of the two brothers was never brought home to anyone, it hardly seemed to matter much. So far as I could see, nobody regretted them; their deaths had brought sorrow on nobody except Captain Murchison, caught by circumstances in a dilemma which could not have been foreseen. The intention of his benefactor had been turned, through events over which neither had the least control, into the instrument of his ruin. I recalled his grim determination to carry on somehow, to face his destiny to its inevitable end.

Then, when I least expected it, I had news of him. I had been sent out on some errand for the Professor, and was returning home by tube in the late afternoon. I had bought an evening paper and was

reading it inattentively, finding in it nothing that appealed to me at the moment. Then, as I was about to let it fall to the floor of the carriage, an insignificant

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headline caught my eye. I read the half dozen lines which followed it, then gripped the paper tightly in a sudden surge of excitement. It was some moments before I could bring myself to study the paragraph coherently and give full weight to the meaning of the terse words.

'BRITISH STEAMER ON FIRE IN MID-ATLANTIC.

'The steamer *Brackenthorpe Manor* is reported on fire in the Atlantic, about a thousand miles from the American Coast. The *Brackenthorpe Manor* left New Orleans a week ago with a cargo of cotton for Liverpool. The Lake liner *Wastwater* has picked up her signals of distress and is hastening to the rescue at full speed.'

I fancy I ran the greater part of the way from Paddington to Westbourne Terrace. The Professor happened to be crossing the hall as I breathlessly flung open the front door, and turned upon me in astonishment.

'Why, my boy, what on earth is the matter?' he exclaimed.

I thrust the paper into his hands. 'Look at this, sir!' I replied. 'Look at what's happened to the *Brackenthorpe Manor*! If ever bad luck pursued a man—'

The Professor adjusted his glasses with irritating slowness, then read the paragraph I pointed out to him slowly and carefully. Indeed, so deliberate was he that I fancied that his mind was concentrated upon something else, and I broke in upon him excitedly.

'Don't you see, sir! *The Brackenthorpe Manor*, Captain Murchison's ship, on fire and sending out S.O.S. signals.'

'I see,' replied the Professor gravely. Still holding the paper, he walked into the study and seated himself at his desk.

'Very interesting, very interesting, indeed,' he continued after a long pause. 'The hand of God, or of man—who can tell? I imagine it

all depends on whether the *Wastwater* reaches the spot in time—. Well, we can say no more until we hear further news.'

And while I waited in a fever of impatience, the Professor relapsed into a condition of absent-mindedness which, in my excited state, goaded me to exasperation. I spent the evening at my club, dashing out of the smoking room every five minutes to look at the skein slowly spun out by the tape machine. But no news came through of the fate of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* or her skipper. It was after midnight by the time I got home, but I was out of bed again a good hour before I discovered a newspaper stall upon which I could buy a paper. I tore it open, and there, fully displayed upon the middle page, were the staring headlines.

THRILLING DRAMA IN MID-OCEAN. HEROIC STRUGGLE ON BURNING STEAMER. RESCUE BY LINER IN A GALE.

The newspaper story, if vivid, was precise. The *Wastwater*, assisted by the flames from the burning *Brackenthorpe Manor*, had reached the spot in time to rescue Captain Murchison and his crew, and was now back on her course for Southampton, which she was expected to reach in three days' time. So much I gathered, with a feeling of heartfelt thankfulness. The rest of the story could wait, as far as I was concerned.

But I had not to wait long. The newspapers, momentarily lacking any other theme of interest, appeared to thirst for details, which the wireless operator of the *Wastwater*, now romping homewards at twenty-four knots, hastened to supply. By the following morning the account of the rescue was complete.

It seemed that, when the *Brackenthorpe Manor* was four days out of New Orleans, the carpenter detected signs of fire among the cotton in Number Two hold. Captain Murchison was at once informed, and steps were taken to deal with the outbreak. The vessel was kept on her course, and it seemed at first as if the fire was being got under. Next day, however, it was still smouldering, and all attempts to get at the seat of the conflagration were unsuccessful.

Captain Murchison was urged to put back, but after careful consideration it was determined to attempt to keep the fire in check and make for the nearest English port. A gale had sprung up from the west, and it was thought better to keep the vessel before it. If she had been put head to wind, there was more risk of fanning the flames, and further, if the sea rose to any considerable extent, it might be impossible for the *Brackenthorpe Manor* to make headway against it.

As a matter of fact this course was justified. By the third day after the discovery of the fire, the gale had increased considerably, and it would have been impossible for the *Brackenthorpe Manor* to have made her way westward. But during the course of that afternoon, the flames burst through the hatches, and it soon became evident that the forepart of the ship, at all events, must be abandoned. The crew were brought aft, and the vessel was kept head to wind, so that the flames were blown forward. But by evening the intense heat in the burning hold had set fire to the coal in the cross-bunker, and the heat and smoke in the stokehold became intolerable. The firemen were brought on deck, while desperate rushes, manned by volunteers headed by Captain Murchison himself, were made into the stokehold to throw enough coal on the furnaces to give the vessel steerage way.

That night must have been a terrible one. The gale increased in force, and the waves began to pour over the stern of the struggling ship, filling the decks with water. To add to the horror of the situation, the fire spread aft, and smoke appeared through the hatches of Number Three hold. The engine-room in turn became uninhabitable, and as the fires died down—for by this time the stokehold was full of suffocating smoke which not even Captain Murchison could penetrate—the revolutions of the propellers slowly ceased, and the vessel turned broadside on to the sea. By midnight it was clear that all hope of saving the ship must be abandoned. The wireless operator, after a desperate struggle to reach his cabin, managed to send out an S.O.S., which was picked up by the *Wastwater*, then about a hundred miles distant.

The rescue was effected at dawn. The *Wastwater* hove in sight just as the crew of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, sheltering as best as they could on the weather side of their ship from the flames and smoke that poured from her, were struggling to build rafts out of anything which would float, in their attempt to escape from the furnace which menaced them. It was only by the exertions of Captain Murchison that many of them were saved from being washed overboard. The *Wastwater* came up to windward and launched her boats under her own lee, and picked up the crew of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* as they leapt over the side. Every man of them was saved, as much by luck as by the excellent seamanship of the captain of the *Wastwater*. Captain Murchison was the last to leave, and the *Wastwater* was put upon her course once more. The last sight of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* showed her a mass of flames from stem to stern and sinking rapidly.

I have given the gist of the newspaper accounts as succinctly as I can. But the whole adventure thrilled me to the core, set my imagination to work upon every detail, recorded and unrecorded. Through all my visions ran the figure of Captain Murchison, masterful, dominating the catastrophe with his powerful presence. To me, as indeed to the reporters of the event, he was the hero of the hour.

Rather to my surprise the Professor read the accounts of the loss of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* with almost as great attention as I did myself. As a rule, such events, however sensational, interested him not at all. I explained this manifestation on his part by the fact that the *Brackenthorpe Manor* had been the property of the murdered Heatherdales, and that everything connected, however remotely, with that curious case, had still an appeal for him.

But I was frankly amazed at the proposition which he made on Thursday morning, when we met at breakfast. The papers had announced that the *Wastwater* was due at Southampton early on Friday morning, and the Professor pointed to this item of news as he passed one of them over to me.

'I have been thinking about Captain Murchison,' he said

abruptly. 'I imagine that he will have plenty of business to attend to in London as soon as he lands, business connected with the loss of his ship.'

'I expect he will, sir,' I replied. 'I don't know what the formalities are in these matters.'

'Neither do I,' said the Professor. 'His position is a curious one. He was the sole owner of the vessel as well as her captain. Further, I gather that he had neither office nor home on shore, that he always lived and transacted his business on board his ship. I fear that he will find himself homeless, and to a man of his stamp a hotel is a most unsatisfactory makeshift. I suggest that you go down to Southampton this evening, meet the *Wastwater*, and bring Captain Murchison back here with you.'

'It's most awfully kind of you to think of it, sir,' I exclaimed in amazement, for the Professor had a rooted objection to strangers staying in the house. 'But won't he be terribly in your way?'

'Not temporarily, at all events,' replied the Professor. 'I imagine that it will not take very long to arrange for more permanent quarters for him. So off you go this afternoon, and send me a telegram to-morrow informing me when I can expect your return with Captain Murchison. I shall be busy all to-day, and shall not require your presence, so you can leave for Southampton by any train you like.' I bolted my breakfast and went straight off to Waterloo. This was the sort of errand that appealed to me. I longed to see the man, to hear the whole story of this wonderful adventure which had captured the attention of two continents. What I expected I hardly knew, but I was in a fever of excited anticipation which allowed me no rest, until at last, on the Friday morning, the blurred and enormous bulk of the *Wastwater* loomed up through the dawn mist.

As she made fast alongside the quay I fought my way through the reporters, the men with cameras, all the mixed crowd who are always present to welcome a liner's arrival. But the *Wastwater* was more than an ordinary liner this trip, she was freighted with romance, with sensation, with a rich cargo of copy for the hungry papers. Looking back, I marvel at the ease with which I got on board, though

at the time it seemed to me hours before I succeeded in setting foot on the *Wastwater's* decks.

I found Captain Murchison at last—he was in the smoking-room, surrounded by a surging crowd of reporters—and sustained a shock almost of disappointment. I suppose I had vague expectations of seeing him bruised, blackened, scarred, his clothes torn and scorched. So vivid was my perception of all that he had gone through that I failed to realise that several days had passed since the event, enough, at all events, to allow this sturdy shipmaster the opportunity of removing all outward traces of his ordeal. He stood there calm, dignified, neat, a big man among a crowd of lesser beings, dominating them even now as he had always dominated my imagination.

He saw me at once and came forward, parting the throng before him with a gesture. But for the deep lines upon his face and the unfathomable look in his eyes, it might have been only yesterday that we parted at the gangway of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*.

'It is very good of you to come,' he said simply.

I blurted out the Professor's message, and Murchison glanced at me sharply.

'It seems that I have friends unknown to myself,' he replied after a second's pause. 'Yes, I'll come for a night or two, till I've had time to make other arrangements. I shall in any case have to go up to London to see the underwriters—'

That was all the conversation we had just then. A steward bustled up and muttered something in Captain Murchison's ear. 'Right, I'll come along now,' he replied. Then, turning to me, 'The captain wants me. Wait here, I shan't be long.'

He returned at length, his business completed. But there were a thousand things to be done before we could leave the port, officials to be interviewed, the crew of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* to be accommodated, and such like. It was not until the late afternoon that I could wire the Professor to expect us about half-past eight that evening.

We got away at last, just catching the train at the West station.

The last of the reporters travelled up with us, and it was not till we left Waterloo in a taxi that we were alone. I was longing to hear Murchison's account of his adventure, but he seemed disposed to talk of anything else. We discussed a hundred things during our drive, and it was not until we crossed Bayswater Road that Murchison made any reference to the past.

'Has Dr. Priestley found out anything more about the murder of Mr. Gerald?' he asked casually.

I hesitated a moment. 'As I hinted to you before, I fancy he's got his suspicions,' I replied cautiously. 'But as he's close as an oyster, you know it's very difficult to get anything out of him.'

Murchison laughed. 'Quite right,' he said. 'I'm afraid that business is going to become an unsolved mystery, like the murder of his brother. Is there any news of Dr. Heatherdale arriving from New Zealand to take up his inheritance?'

'Not that I've heard of,' I replied. 'Withers has all that in hand, of course. I haven't seen him for some time.'

Murchison's face hardened. 'Withers?' he replied. 'I suppose I shall have to go and call on this Mr. Withers. These lawyer fellows are like ghouls, making fat profits out of other men's misfortunes—'

The taxi drew up at the door, cutting short further conversation. I led Murchison into the study, where the Professor was seated before a pile of books at his desk. He looked up as we came in.

'This is Captain Murchison, sir,' I said.

'Ah, Captain Murchison, I congratulate you upon your escape from disaster,' said the Professor gravely. 'I am very glad of the opportunity of making your acquaintance. Sit down and make yourself comfortable.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A TRAGIC QUESTION

AT last I was to hear Murchison's own story, told here in this

comfortable room without fear of interruption. I led the Captain to a chair, found cigars and matches for him, poured him out a drink from the decanter which stood upon a side table. The Professor had leant back in his chair, the tips of his fingers together, a favourite attitude of attention. The stage was set, it only remained to persuade the narrator to play his part.

Just then, to my astonishment, I heard the front door open and close. A few seconds elapsed, and Mary opened the door of the study.

'Mr. Withers, sir,' she announced.

I leapt to my feet in amazement. What on earth could this fellow Withers want here at this time of night? He came in heavily, making for the Professor's desk, and I waited for some word which should give me the clue to this unheard-of visit. But halfway across the room he caught sight of Murchison, and stopped in his tracks, thunderstruck.

'Why, good Lord, Murchison, what in the world are you doing here?' he exclaimed.

'Captain Murchison landed at Southampton this morning, as you may have observed in the evening papers,' said the Professor quietly. 'It is fortunate that you should have met him. You will, no doubt, have plenty to say to one another.'

Withers plunged into a chair by the skipper's side, and taking no further notice of us, began to ply him with questions in a low voice. The Professor beckoned me to his desk, and handed me an envelope with the addressed side downwards.

'Will you be kind enough to post this for me yourself, Harold?' he said distinctly. 'You will realise its importance from the address.'

I took the letter and made for the door, casting a reluctant glance at Murchison and Withers as I did so. It was evident that the eager questions of the latter had incited the beginning of the narration I so longed to hear. I hurried out of the room, and it was not until I was in the hall that I looked at the inscription upon the envelope in my hand. Then I stopped, dumbfounded, and stared at it stupidly. It was addressed to myself.

It took me a perceptible time to realise that this was the Professor's method of conveying a message to me which he was anxious that the others should not overhear. As soon as this was clear to me, I tore open the envelope and extracted its contents.

These were brief, a couple of sentences. 'Inspector Hanslet is in the drawing-room. Bring him into the study as if you had met him at the front door.'

At last a glimmer of light came to me. I raced upstairs into the drawing-room, where I found Hanslet ensconced in a chair before the fire.

He leapt to his feet as I opened the door. 'Hullo, Mr. Merefield!' he exclaimed. 'I thought you'd be up before long. Has he come yet?'

'Yes, I brought him up from Southampton, and we arrived a few minutes ago,' I replied. 'The Professor has just sent me up—'

'From Southampton?' broke in Hanslet. 'What the devil was he doing there?'

'Why, he landed there this morning,' I replied. 'You must have seen all that business about the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. Captain Murchison's going to stay here—'

'Captain Murchison!' exclaimed Hanslet. 'Who's talking about him? Withers, I mean. Has Withers come yet?'

'Yes, he's just arrived. Look here, this is the message the Professor gave me.'

Hanslet glanced at it and grinned. 'Yes, that's all right,' he said. 'Well now you'll see the fun begin. He told me this morning that if I came round about eight o'clock this evening he'd demonstrate the murderer of the two Heatherdales to me. "Demonstrate" was the word, and I'm precious anxious to see this demonstration, for I've been waiting for an excuse to lay hands on the fellow long enough. I've got the warrant in my pocket now.'

'Well, you can bet the Professor's found some proof, or he wouldn't have sent for you,' I replied. 'The fellow is sitting in the study, talking to Murchison at this moment.'

Again Hanslet grinned. 'Just like the Professor to have Murchison in at the death,' he remarked. 'He wants him to prove something

about that voyage Mr. Gerald was to have taken, I'll be bound. I suppose we'd better go down and carry out his instructions.'

We descended the stairs softly. I opened and closed the front door.

'Come along in, I'm sure the Professor will be delighted to see you!' I exclaimed, and opening the study door, ushered Hanslet into the room.

The Professor was still seated at his desk. Captain Murchison and Withers were talking in subdued tones where I had last seen them. That this was the setting of the stage desired by the Professor, I had no doubt. The whole scene bore an air of unreality; for a moment I wondered whether I had been dreaming, had imagined the drama of the sea, the promised revelation of the Heatherdale murderer. This quiet room, austere but luxurious, what could it have in common with that thrilling rescue in the heart of the gale, those brutal murders so long unexplained? Yet, before my fascinated eyes, the chief actors in both tragedies sat talking. . . .

How Mr. Withers' guilt was to be demonstrated I could not guess. Was there some flaw in his armour that only the Professor had perceived? Some flaw that required the presence of Captain Murchison to expose it to public view? I was content to wait, to watch and listen with all my eyes and ears, waiting for the Professor to play his master-stroke.

Our entrance caused very little disturbance. The Professor looked up and nodded. Captain Murchison glanced towards the door, then seeing me with a stranger to him, continued his conversation. Withers did not appear to notice the interruption, and leant forward in his chair, as if wholly absorbed by the details of Murchison's story.

Hanslet, taking no chances, dropped into a chair beside Mr. Withers. The Professor beckoned to me, and I took up a position opposite to him, on the further side of his desk. He pushed across to me a bundle of papers with a gesture indicating that I should occupy myself with them. He had a pencil in his hand, with which he drew elaborate geometrical patterns on a pad of blotting-paper,

apparently absorbed in thought.

I turned over the papers which he had passed to me mechanically. Across the room there came to me snatches of Captain Murchison's voice. He was apparently telling Withers the story of the disaster which had befallen the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, and rapt in his description, had become oblivious of our presence. Sentences here and there reached my ears. 'Queer thing, spontaneous combustion. I've known of cases—' 'Blowing hard from west-sou'-west, nasty sea dead astern,' 'Daren't put her head to it, we'd all have been stifled by the smoke coming from for'ard.'

I strained my ears to listen, but every now and then a taxi passing outside drowned the low tones in which Murchison was speaking. At last Withers put in a word which I could not hear, and the Captain's voice rose a trifle as he replied.

'Oh, yes, the policies are all right, there's no fear of that, thank heaven. I managed to bring all the ship's papers off with me—about all I did save. They're in my bag there; the underwriters will want them as soon as I make my claim. They won't make any difficulties, they've known me and my poor old craft ever since she was launched.'

To my astonishment the Professor looked up suddenly. 'I trust that you were adequately insured, Captain Murchison,' he said.

Murchison turned slightly in his chair. 'Good job for me I was, Dr. Priestley,' he replied. 'As I believe you know, the *Brackenthorpe Manor* was my own ship, and pretty nearly everything I had in the world. I'm covered all right, but that's very little satisfaction to a man who has lost his ship.'

'The loss of the ship may prove to have been a blessing in disguise,' persisted the Professor evenly. 'I think you will agree that you were fortunate to escape so lightly. If the *Wastwater* had not arrived when she did, you might have lost your life, or at least the lives of some of your crew.'

'That's true enough,' assented Captain Murchison. 'And, on the other hand, if she'd come up sooner we might have made shift to save some of our belongings. The *Brackenthorpe Manor* was my

home, Dr. Priestley, as this house is yours. I lived on board of her, did all my business on board of her. I'm like a landsman whose place has been burnt down without his having had a chance of saving a single stick out of it. It isn't the value of the stuff so much as its associations. Why, I left the vessel with what I stood up in and the ship's papers in a bag. Everything else is at the bottom of the Atlantic, clothes, private papers and what not.'

'At the bottom of the Atlantic, beyond the hope of recovery,' assented the Professor gravely. 'A fire will sometimes yield ashes or fragments which will serve for identification, but the sea holds for ever everything committed to her depths.'

'You'd have a job to identify anything that went down with the *Brackenthorpe Manor*,' said Murchison with a grim laugh. 'There's over a mile of water where she's resting. I'm worse off to that extent than the landsman who's had a fire.'

The Professor sat silent for a moment, as though considering the immensity of the misfortune which had overtaken this man. Hans-let shifted restlessly in his chair, never taking his eyes off the back of Mr. Withers, as that heavy lawyer sat forward in his seat. In the silence I could hear the unhurried ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece, swayed only by the passage of time and oblivious to human passions.

'You have lost everything,' said the Professor at last, slowly and distinctly. 'Even to the trifles which you used every day and had grown to value.'

'Yes, there was a pair of binoculars, given me some years ago, when I first shipped as mate—' began Captain Murchison. 'Hated leaving them, but it couldn't be helped. There were lots of things like that.'

'So I imagine,' replied the Professor. 'All your apparatus necessary to your business as a shipowner. Your typewriter, for instance.'

Captain Murchison looked up quickly. 'Typewriter!' he exclaimed. 'What should I want a typewriter for?'

'You must have had a large amount of correspondence,' replied the Professor. 'Some of us find these modern inventions of considerable

assistance.'

'Not I,' said the Captain contemptuously. 'I've never learned to use the things. The old-fashioned pen and ink are good enough for me. What made you think I should take a typewriter to sea? I never heard of such an idea!'

'Not perhaps a very extravagant idea, after all,' replied the Professor mildly. 'One of those little portable machines might be very handy. They take up no space, they can be put away in a drawer of a desk, such as I suppose you possessed in your cabin. Still, as the desk itself is at the bottom of the sea, the point is scarcely of importance. The contents of your desk are for ever sealed from enquiring eyes, Captain Murchison.'

'There were precious few secrets in it,' said Captain Murchison with a sigh, as it seemed to me, of relief. 'I can stand the loss of my things. It's some of my poor fellows I'm worrying about. They've lost everything they possess.'

'Except their lives,' replied the Professor gravely. 'There were no casualties of any kind, I understand?'

'Nothing to speak of,' said Captain Murchison. 'Some of us got a bit singed with the fire, of course. You can't live on the same vessel as a burning cargo of cotton without knowing it. Then others got a bit knocked about when we left the ship. There was no end of a sea running. But there was nothing that the doctor of the *Wastwater* couldn't put right, with one exception.'

'What was that?' enquired the Professor.

'My carpenter,' replied Captain Murchison. 'He got badly burned about the arms, trying to get at the fire when we first discovered it. The subsequent exposure didn't do him any good, and he had to lie up on board the *Wastwater*. We put him into hospital at Southampton, and there, I'm afraid, he'll have to stop for a bit.'

'Dear me, I'm sorry to hear that,' exclaimed the Professor, in a tone of concern. 'Had he been with you long?'

'Ever since I took over the *Brackenthorpe Manor* on the day she left the builders' hands,' replied Captain Murchison.

'How very unfortunate!' exclaimed the Professor. 'I had hoped to

meet him.'

I stared at the Professor in amazement. The whole tenor of his conversation with Captain Murchison had been beyond my comprehension. And now, what on earth was the meaning of his sudden solicitude for the carpenter of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*?

Captain Murchison seemed as puzzled as I was.

'You hoped to meet old Braggs, my carpenter!' he exclaimed. 'Why, do you know anything about him?'

'Very little,' replied the Professor, and from his tone I realised that his apparent casual words were indeed of the most intense significance. 'Very little, indeed. But I happen to have seen some of his handiwork, and as a result I am anxious to consult him upon the construction of packing-cases. I should have liked his opinion on the use of brass screws for such a purpose, for instance.'

The events of the next few minutes happened so rapidly that I find it almost impossible to describe them coherently. As the Professor's meaning dawned upon me, I saw Captain Murchison rise slowly and wearily from his chair. He stood for a moment, laughing queerly, both arms above his head in the attitude of a man who stretches his limbs after sitting for long in a cramped position. The Professor leaned swiftly forward over his desk, his eyes set and hard, gazing intently into those of the powerful man before him. So, for a perceptible interval, these two looked at one another, the Professor with a gaze almost terrifying in its intensity, the sailor with a smile which seemed to harden rather than to soften his rugged face, throwing up ridges upon it like the ridges of waves. I, watching entranced, saw for the first time the face of a strong man who had failed in the great enterprise of his life, and having the strength to recognise the fact, was prepared to recognise the inevitable consequences.

There was no word spoken between them; the duel of wits was over, there could be no more need for speech. Suddenly, swift as lightning, Captain Murchison's right hand dropped to his hip-pocket. Swift as had been his action, Hanslet must have been even swifter. While I sat paralysed, wondering what this might

mean, Hanslet launched himself in one bound from his chair and flung his arms round the man. He might as well have flung himself at a steel pillar. Captain Murchison did not even totter from the impact. He disengaged his left hand, and with a contemptuous gesture, thrust Hanslet from him, as a man might thrust aside a small child. Yet for all the strength the act exhibited, it seemed somehow as though it had been performed without violence, that Captain Murchison had treated his aggressor not with the hostility due to a personal enemy, but with the impatience we show to a meddler who interferes with our long-matured plans. Then as Hanslet staggered back against the wall with the force of the thrust I saw that Murchison's right hand grasped a small automatic pistol.

The Professor! He meant to silence the Professor before— The idea galvanised me into sudden action. I had been something of a rugger player at school, and a flash of my early training returned to me. It almost seemed that someone shouted in my ear, 'Tackle him low!' as I, in my turn, hurled myself at that upright figure. His knees! Clasp him round his knees! Bring him down—

As my arms clasped them, wound themselves round his massive limbs, a sharp report rang through my head. He had fired! What at? At me, perhaps. I felt no wound, but that would come later. Each fraction of a second seemed an age as I tugged at the man's legs, solid and unyielding as a pillar. Then all at once they swayed, the towering body above me collapsed, as a factory chimney collapses when it is felled. I felt myself crushed to the floor, the breath driven out of me by that falling body.

I lay half-stunned, hearing voices far away, as the patient in the dentist's chair, recovering from the effects of gas, hears voices across the immensity of space. It was almost with a shock of surprise that I recognised the speakers.

'Why, the man's shot himself,' I heard Hanslet say.

Then, from much further off, came the unemotional tones of the Professor.

'Of course, what did you expect him to do?'

'Knock us all on the head and then clear out,' said Hanslet

resentfully. 'I never met such a fellow in my life. Why, he's as strong as an elephant!'

'What would have been the use?' asked the Professor. 'He would have been bound to have been caught. But we can discuss that later. Harold is not hurt, is he?'

By this time I had recovered from the shock, and could take an interest in my surroundings. Captain Murchison lay outstretched upon the floor, pinning me down with the whole weight of his body across my chest. Hanslet was kneeling on the carpet by his side. Withers, apparently petrified, was staring at us with a horrified expression on his face. Only the Professor, calm and grave, remained unmoved, with the expression of a man who has seen facts work out to their inevitable conclusions.

With Hanslet's assistance, I wriggled out from under Captain Murchison's prostrate form, and scrambled to my feet. A single glance showed me that the man was dead. He was not of a type to bungle the most serious act of his life. The bullet had passed clean through his brain, in at the right temple and out, leaving a shattering wound, at the left. Hanslet, after a few seconds' inspection, picked up a newspaper and covered the dead man's face with it. As the merciful sheet hid the wound and the dark pool upon the carpet, I heard Withers give a gasp of relief.

'We'll get him away to the mortuary, as soon as I can get in touch with my people,' said Hanslet. 'I wonder if that shot was heard outside?'

I went to the study door and opened it. Not a sound came to my ears from any part of the house.

'Fortunately my daughter is away,' remarked the Professor. 'The servants are not likely to have heard anything. They have probably gone to bed, as it is past ten o'clock. You notice that the pistol is of a very small bore and the walls of these houses are very thick.'

'Well, that's a blessing,' replied Hanslet. 'We don't want a crowd of screaming women in this show. Luckily there are plenty of witnesses to say how he came by his end.'

Then suddenly he turned to the Professor. 'I don't ask you to explain this at the moment,' he said. 'But you can't expect me to understand exactly—'

The Professor looked across the room to the lawyer, who still sat dazed and horrified, staring at the motionless form upon the carpet. There was something fantastic, ridiculous, about its attitude. I was irresistibly reminded of a man asleep on the beach with a newspaper over his head to keep the sun from his eyes—

'Mr. Withers! What reason did I give for asking you to come here this evening?'

Mr. Withers tore his eyes from their dreadful contemplation, and looked uncomprehendingly at the Professor.

'You said that you had an important revelation to make regarding the murder of the two Heatherdales,' he replied mechanically.

'And you, Inspector Hanslet?'

Hanslet hesitated and glanced sideways at Mr. Withers.

'You may speak freely now,' said the Professor, seeing his reluctance.

'You promised to demonstrate the murderer to me,' growled Hanslet.

In reply the Professor pointed silently to the form that lay upon the floor.

There was a moment's silence, broken by Hanslet's incredulous voice.

'Do you mean to say that you brought us both here to see that man shoot himself!' he exclaimed. 'How the devil did you know that he was going to do it?'

'I did not know,' replied the Professor mildly. 'Although, I confess, I thought it very probable that he had provided himself with some means of taking his own life, as a result of my experience of criminal psychology. A strong, resourceful, determined man, who deliberately embarks upon a criminal course for some definite object, invariably reckons on the possibility of failure and the consequences which that failure will entail. In this case the inevitable penalty of failure was death. Captain Murchison, as I expected, preferred death at his own hands to death at the hands of justice.'

'But what proof have you that he was the murderer?' insisted Hanslet, still unconvinced.

'Proof!' said the Professor testily. 'Logical proof, mathematical proof, the only form of proof recognised by a man of sense. If you require anything further, you must seek for it. Now that you know the subject, you should not find it difficult to confirm his guilt. I will, if necessary, outline the history of the murder, but not to-night.'

'But—' ventured Hanslet.

The Professor silenced him with a gesture.

'Why do you suppose the man shot himself?' he demanded. 'Because he had lost his ship? Why, the loss of his ship was merely the last act in his carefully prepared scheme. No, he shot himself, because I made it clear to him that I knew his whole plot from beginning to end. What other course was open to him? Even if he had killed me, and so destroyed my evidence against him, he would have had to pay the penalty. If he had killed us all and escaped from the house, what future was there for him? When he told us that he had lost all he possessed, he spoke the truth. He was destitute until the underwriters had paid the insurance on his ship.'

Hanslet made no reply. After a few seconds of deep thought he walked across the room and drew a paper from his pocket and cast it upon the fire, where it burned and crackled merrily. He watched it until it was no more than a sheet of black ash, then took the poker and reduced it to powder.

'Til ask you to explain this business more fully to-morrow, Professor,' he said. 'Td better see about the disposal of the body now.'

He turned suddenly to Mr. Withers. 'I don't know if you understand this any better than I do,' he exclaimed. 'But in any case I fancy I owe you an apology.'

Mr. Withers looked at him in some concern. 'An apology?' he repeated. 'I don't quite understand, Inspector Hanslet.'

Hanslet glanced at the fireplace with a grim smile. 'No, I don't suppose you do,' he replied. 'But the apology is owing for all that. Not only to you, but to Mrs. Milton.'

'Mrs. Withers,' corrected the lawyer primly. 'We were married very quietly the day before yesterday. And now, with your leave, Dr. Priestley, I will rejoin my poor wife, who will be alarmed by my long absence.'

He made his way to the door, carefully avoiding the proximity of the corpse. I helped him on with his coat, and shut the front door after him. When I returned to the study, Hanslet was still standing in an attitude of stupefaction.

'Well, I'm damned!' was all he said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DR. PRIESTLEY EXPLAINS

INSPECTOR HANSLET was certainly remarkably efficient in effecting the removal of the body of Captain Murchison. By midnight it had been conveyed to the mortuary, without attracting any unwelcome attention. He left us that night without asking any further questions, but with a request that he might be allowed to return early next morning, a request to which the Professor willingly acceded. As a matter of fact, we had barely finished breakfast when he turned up.

We settled ourselves in the study, which bore no traces of the scene of the previous evening, and Hanslet lost no time in opening the conversation.

'What I want to know, Dr. Priestley,' he began, 'is when did you first know that this fellow Murchison was the criminal?'

'I cannot say that I *knew* until yesterday morning,' replied the Professor. 'I considered it highly probable at the time of Mr. Gerald's murder, and I reduced that probability to a mathematical certainty at the time of my visit to White Pelham.'

'Then you've known all along?' exclaimed Hanslet blankly.

'I repeat that I have not *known*,' replied the Professor quietly. 'You think, perhaps, that I should have communicated my suspicions to

you. But if I had, would you have credited them? I think not. I was in possession of no facts which were not equally known to you. Further—and that is the most important point—I could suggest no motive for the double crime.'

Hanslet nodded. 'Perhaps you are right, Professor,' he said. 'I am not sure that I altogether understand what he was after, even now.'

The Professor smiled gravely. 'The key to that lies in Sir Francis Heatherdale's will,' he replied. 'Sir Francis, no doubt, while primarily anxious that his faith in the *Brackenthorpe Manor* should be justified, intended also that Captain Murchison should be provided for for life. He was to be part owner and commander of the vessel during the twenty years' period, during which he believed that he could make sufficient profit to provide for his old age. But either because he was too optimistic, or because his two sons, Captain Murchison's partners, did not enter into the spirit of his wishes, it became evident that the management of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* could only be carried on at a loss. Murchison was faced with twenty years of struggle, bound to partners who detested the whole business, and would, therefore, spend as little as they could upon it. And at the end of that period, all he could look forward to was a third of the breaking-up value of the vessel, probably an inconsiderable sum.

'There seemed no alternative. The terms of the will forbade, under penalty, either the sale or the laying-up of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. I imagine that Captain Murchison must have racked his brains for a very long time before the solution of his difficulties occurred to him. Then all must have been clear to him. Let him become the sole owner of the vessel, and then let her become a total loss at sea. Instead of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, a millstone round his neck, he would then receive her value in cash from the underwriters. The terms of the will would have been complied with, and he would be a free man.'

Hanslet whistled softly. 'So that was it, was it?' he said. 'By Jove, a bold idea!'

'Captain Murchison was a bold man and an exceedingly able one,' replied the Professor, in a tone of appreciation. 'His actions

were masterly, and the policy underlying them even more so. From the very first, he grasped the most important fact of all, namely, that to anyone who knew the terms of the will, he must appear as the man most vitally interested in the continued life of the two Heatherdale brothers. He counted upon the practical certainty that any investigation into their deaths would begin with a search for motive. And that motive would assuredly be attributed to those who had an interest in their deaths, to anybody, in fact, rather than to himself. I confess that I was myself misled by consideration of motive. After Mr. Gerald received his warning, I was inclined to believe that he would be safer in the custody of Captain Murchison than anywhere else.

'As a matter of fact, I was probably correct, but for a different reason. Murchison was far too astute to make away with Mr. Gerald when it was known that the two were together. His policy throughout was to mislead, to mislead both his victims and those who would investigate their deaths. He was faced not only with the problem of achieving the death of the two brothers, but also of ensuring that their bodies should be found, in order that their deaths would be acknowledged, and found in circumstances which would lead suspicion away from himself. It is, from an impersonal point of view, a pity that he was so pressed for time over the matter of Mr. Gerald. I am sure, if he had had more leisure, he would have carried it out with the artistic skill which he devoted to the murder of Mr. Austin.'

'I wish you could tell me how those murders were carried out,' broke in Hanslet. 'I shall have to give some reason at the Yard for attributing them to Murchison.'

'I propose to do so,' replied the Professor. 'You will realise that my reconstruction of them is the result of pure deduction. You should be able to verify this by enquiry, when you know in what direction enquiry should be made.'

'Oh, I'll make enquiries right enough, if you'll tell me where to begin,' said Hanslet eagerly.

'I will endeavour to do so,' replied the Professor. 'Let us deal first

with the case of Mr. Austin. Now, from the first I was dissatisfied with the theory that he was murdered in Horn's Lane on his way home from the station, and with the evidence supporting that theory. I therefore endeavoured to form an alternative theory, which would be in accordance with the actual rather than with the apparent facts.

'The first point that attracted my attention was the probability that Mr. Austin, or someone roughly resembling him, did actually travel by the last train from Liverpool Street. Assuming that this person was not Mr. Austin, we can immediately deduce certain facts. The first of these is that that person knew of Mr. Austin's whereabouts, dead or alive. The second is that the purpose of his journey to White Pelham was connected with the disposal of the body in Horn's Lane.'

The Professor paused and glanced at Hanslet. 'Do you follow me so far?' he enquired.

'Yes, perfectly,' replied Hanslet. 'It comes to this, that the man who travelled to White Pelham was the murderer, not the victim.'

'I could not infer that he was the actual murderer,' said the Professor. 'But what follows? If Mr. Austin did not reach White Pelham alive by train, how was it that his body came to be found in Horn's Lane? There were two possibilities, one that the traveller was about to meet the body, conveyed to the spot by some other agency, the other that the body was already hidden in the vicinity.'

'The more I considered these two possibilities, the less I favoured the first. It seemed to me that the crime was essentially one in which no accomplices had participated. The murderer, then, must have been identical with the traveller, and he must have been someone who was well acquainted with White Pelham, with Mr. Austin's habits and movements, and at the same time must have possessed the physical strength necessary to enable him to carry single-handed the body of a big man.'

'Murchison was big enough to carry a house,' put in Hanslet ruefully.

'Exactly. But I cannot claim to have suspected Murchison at this stage. But now the question arose: if the body were already in the

vicinity, how and when had the murder been committed? You observe that I ruled out the possibility of Mr. Austin being hidden alive. Upon examination of the facts, I discovered that the murder might have taken place any time after Mr. Austin left Mr. Withers' office. No reliable evidence of his being seen alive after that time existed, and his impersonator could easily have sent the telephone and telegraph messages described to me.

'Here I let the matter rest until after Mr. Gerald's death. Had I proceeded to White Pelham at once, I might have discovered the truth, although in the end it was chance that revealed it to me. I knew that the most careful investigations had been made at the time, and it seemed hopeless to expect to discover any fresh facts after a year had elapsed. But when I finally undertook the journey, the packing case was brought to light, and the matter became clear to me at once.'

'I wish I had found that infernal case!' exclaimed Hanslet regretfully.

'Even had you done so, I doubt whether it would have conveyed its message at that time,' replied the Professor. 'Remember, I had already formed a theory that the body had been hidden near Horn's Lane, and I was, therefore, on the look-out for a likely hiding-place. On learning that a den-hole existed, I naturally determined to explore it, and the finding of the packing case was my reward. It bore traces of having contained the body. But that was by no means its principal significance. What interested me most was its construction. Did you ever hear of a carpenter making a packing case of special wood, planed on both sides, and fastened together with brass screws?'

'Never!' exclaimed Hanslet emphatically.

'Neither had I. But, when you come to think of it, it is exactly the sort of case a ship's carpenter would make. He would have plenty of leisure in which to work at it, and he would use brass in preference to steel in order to avoid rust from sea air. Mind, I do not say that this would have occurred to me before Mr. Gerald's death. But by the time I saw the case, I already had my suspicions.'

'The next point was, how and when did the case with the body in it reach the dene-hole? The answer appeared to me to be—by road the previous night. White Pelham is only forty miles from London, and the main road passes within a few yards of the spot where the case was found.'

'Yes, that all fits in,' agreed Hanslet. 'But where and when was the man murdered?'

'My reconstruction of the crime was as follows. Mr. Austin was said to have returned to his hotel, received a telegram, and gone out again. The truth of this statement, although not irrefutable, was at least probable. If we accept it we may go a step further, and assume that the telegram summoned him to an appointment, and that while keeping it he was murdered.

'This hypothesis led me no further until I began to suspect Captain Murchison. Then I saw that he alone could have the necessary opportunity. I imagine that he knew of Mr. Austin's projected journey to London, and that he resolved to carry out a scheme, long carefully prepared. He sent him a telegram, asking him to come down to the *Brackenthorpe Manor*—which we know to have been in dock at the time—on business. The ship was probably deserted, but for himself and a ship-keeper. Having lured Mr. Austin into his cabin, he fell on him suddenly and murdered him. It was most unlikely that anyone would hear a struggle, and Murchison being a powerful man, the struggle was probably brief. He had had the case made in readiness, possibly long before. I expect that it had stood in his cabin for weeks, apparently as a receptacle for papers, or something of that sort. He put Mr. Austin's body into it and screwed it up. Then came the question of the removal of the body. You remember the van that was standing in the yard at Pirton station, on the night of Mr. Gerald's murder, Inspector?'

'I do,' replied Hanslet in a puzzled tone. 'But what has that got to do with it?'

'Unless I am much mistaken, that van was Murchison's property, and he was its driver. I imagine that it was ready garaged somewhere near the docks on the night of Mr. Gerald's murder. Before putting

the body into the box, Murchison probably changed clothes with it. He then went on shore, providing, incidentally, evidence to any casual observer that his visitor had left the ship. He then fetched the van, and with the assistance of the ship-keeper loaded the case upon it.

He had, of course, to pass the dock gates, but to a man of his resource, this need not have been a difficult matter. He probably carried a certificate, signed in his own name, as to its contents. These may have been described as personal effects; the box was not unlike the old-fashioned seaman's chest. He may even have driven the van openly as Captain Murchison, though such a proceeding would probably have scandalised the watchman.

'Once outside the dock gates, the rest was easy. He only had to drive to White Pelham, unload the case into the dene-hole, under cover of darkness, and drive the van back to its garage. On the following night he returned to White Pelham by train, having provided as much evidence as he could of Mr. Austin being still alive. He hauled the case out of the dene-hole, a task well within the power of his exceptional muscles, opened it, threw the case back, and deposited the body in Horn's Lane. It only remained to change clothes with it once more, to rifle the pockets, and to tread down the grass so as to produce the evidence of a struggle. I imagine he returned to London by walking to Leaford Junction, from which there are trains at intervals throughout the night.'

Again the Professor paused, and Hanslet nodded his head sagely. 'It all seems clear as daylight as you explain it, Professor,' he said.

'Mind, I am not suggesting that all the details were as I have described them,' continued the Professor. 'I am merely elaborating a theory which fits in with the known facts. It is for you to verify the details by enquiry. Nor do I wish you to suppose that I arrived at these conclusions as the result of Mr. Austin's death alone. It was not until Mr. Gerald was murdered that light was thrown upon many doubtful points.'

'I'm bothered if I can see how Murchison could be responsible for that,' said Hanslet.

'Let us consider the matter,' replied the Professor. 'We are, I think, agreed that it can only have been carried out at the instigation of somebody within the very small circle of people who knew of Mr. Gerald's movements and intentions. Granting this, let us turn to that most interesting matter of the warning received by the two brothers. Those warnings must have been sent by the murderer himself, if we allow that he had no accomplices, for no one else could be aware of any special danger to the brothers in the respective localities named.

'What then was the purpose of those warnings? They were, I am convinced, the result of a very keen psychological perception on the part of their author. The first was sent to Mr. Austin, in the sure knowledge that he would either display it to his friends as a joke, or ignore it altogether. The writer of the warning must have known also that Mr. Austin was in the habit of walking home from the station through Horn's Lane. In the sequel the warning actually served a part of its purpose, as Mr. Gerald found it after his brother's death, which had apparently taken place in Horn's Lane.'

'Then you believe that both warnings were written by the same hand, sir?' I ventured.

'Undoubtedly, although at one time I considered the possibility that this might not be so,' replied the Professor. 'The second warning was not sent until Mr. Gerald had seen the first, and had been duly impressed by the fact that his brother's body had been found in the place mentioned. This second warning was calculated, with equal skill, to produce the desired effect upon a man of Mr. Gerald's nervous temperament. It drove him, I regret to say with my consent, from Allingford House, where he would have been safe from any attempt upon him, and also it established a clue as to where the body might be found when the crime had been committed, a very necessary factor in the establishment of his death.

'But there was one curious thing about this second warning. The locality named upon it was Hilton Pennings, a name which appears on the map, but which has fallen into disuse locally. I think we can deduce that the writer was acquainted with the Allingford district

from the map only, and not from personal knowledge. Add that the letter was posted in London, E.G. at a time when we know the *Brackenthorpe Manor* to have been in the Royal Albert Dock, and you will agree with the possibility of Captain Murchison having been the author.'

'Ah, I see!' exclaimed Hanslet. 'I couldn't make out what you meant when you suggested to Murchison that he must have lost his typewriter.'

'No doubt you observed the form of his reply? Instead of a bare statement that he did not possess such a thing, he volunteered the unnecessary remark that a typewriter would be a strange thing to take to sea. It is obvious that to an owner-captain, who transacted all his business in his own cabin, it would be a very natural possession. However, I lay no stress on this particular point.

'Now, to turn to the murder of Mr. Gerald. From the very first I was convinced that the unfortunate man, although he doubtless left Paddington on the afternoon of his murder, did not travel down to Pirton. My reasons for this belief I need not go into, as I have already expressed them more than once. But I do believe that Mr. Gerald was present at Pirton station when the 9.42 arrived that evening, although he had reached it by another route.'

'Then how is it that nobody seems to have actually seen him?' enquired Hanslet. 'There were a couple of dozen local people waiting for the train, and I questioned them all.'

'Because you were enquiring for a living man, and Mr. Gerald happened to be dead at the time,' replied the Professor in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Dead!' exclaimed Hanslet. 'Why, how—'

'Let me reconstruct the crime for you, and you can judge how nearly my theory fits in with the facts. Mr. Gerald received a summons from Captain Murchison to join the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, as arranged, that afternoon. What was his most natural action? To obey the summons. This, I believe, is what he actually did do. He went to Paddington, and caught the 5.30 to Bristol, which arrives at 7.30. I expect that Captain Murchison's instructions, which, you will remember, we have never seen, directed him to take this course. At

Bristol he was met by Murchison, who enticed him into the vehicle he had waiting at the station, by explaining that they were about to drive direct to Avonmouth. As soon as they were clear of the town, Murchison stopped the vehicle at a deserted spot on the road, broke Mr. Gerald's neck with a blow, much as a keeper kills a wounded rabbit, and drove on again to Pirton station at full speed. It is only some forty miles by road, and he had plenty of time to reach his destination by the time the 9.42 arrived.'

'But how is it that we can find no trace of this vehicle?' objected Hanslet.

The Professor turned to me. 'Can you describe the vehicle which passed you in Hilton Pennings that night?'

'No, sir, I can't,' I replied. 'It looked like a closed car of some kind, but I had only a faint glimpse of it.'

'You told me that a van of some kind was standing in the yard of Pirton station, Inspector. Did you obtain a description of it?'

'Only a vague one,' replied Hanslet. 'One man I asked said that it looked like a smartish ten-hundredweight tradesman's van.'

'Would such a vehicle fit in with your impression of the one you saw, Harold?' queried the Professor.

'Exactly, sir,' I replied. 'I only inferred that it was a private car from the speed it was going at.'

'And you, Inspector, inferred that Mr. Gerald was not likely to be met at Pirton by a delivery van. I am convinced that the van you heard of was the same vehicle that Harold saw later. You observe Murchison's scheme. He waited in the station yard until the train came in, called out Mr. Gerald's name in order to create an impression among the bystanders that he was there, then, when the place was comparatively deserted, drove straight to the spot where he had already determined to deposit the body. His actions when he saw somebody at Hilton Pennings, which no doubt he expected to find deserted, shows extraordinary resource. By driving straight at Harold, he made it impossible for him to distinguish anything in the glare of the lights, by causing him to spring aside he occupied his attention for the time necessary for flinging the body into the ditch.

I imagine that somewhere between Pirton station and Hilton Pennings he transferred the body from the inside of the van to the seat beside him, unless, possibly, he carried it there the whole time, which would be in accordance with the audacity of the whole proceeding.'

'But what became of the van next day?' enquired Hanslet.

'As it happened, this was the easiest part of the task. I have no doubt that the van for which you sought is now performing a career of usefulness somewhere in the Balkans. The *Brackenthorpe Manor*—and with my experience of the man's fertility of ideas, I should not be surprised if this, too, was part of a prearranged plan—the *Brackenthorpe Manor* loaded at Avonmouth next morning a cargo of motor tractors and vans, which were driven down to the docks by road from Bristol. What could be easier than for the man in whose hands the whole management of the ship lay to include his own van in the consignment, without attracting any particular remark? We have had to deal with a criminal who made very few mistakes, Inspector.'

So ended, as far as we were concerned, the investigation into the murder of the Heatherdale brothers. From time to time Hanslet dropped in to tell us of stray facts which he had gleaned, all of which tended to support the Professor's theory of the crimes in every detail. A ship-keeper, once employed on the *Brackenthorpe Manor*, remembered that on a date he could not recall, but which must have been within a day or two of Mr. Austin's murder, a biggish gentleman came to see Captain Murchison, and subsequently took away a chest in a motor van. What fixed the incident in his mind was that immediately following it the Captain spent two nights on shore, a most unusual proceeding on his part.

Some weeks later, a seafaring friend of Murchison was found, who stated that on the arrival of the 7.30 on the evening preceding the sailing of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* from Avonmouth, he had seen Murchison talking to a little man with a couple of suit cases. It was also established that the *Brackenthorpe Manor* took eight motor-vans on board at that port. The Bristol consignors had de-

spatched seven.

The Professor received these scraps of information with evident satisfaction. 'My theory withstands the test of fact, it appears,' he said. 'A most resourceful criminal, indeed. I am glad that he took the course he did when faced with the knowledge that his crimes had been discovered. I should have disliked the idea that I had assisted in hanging him.'

'There is only one thing not cleared up, sir,' I replied. 'What about the sinking of the *Brackenthorpe Manor*. Was that accident or design?'

'We have no facts from which to frame an answer to that question,' replied the Professor. 'In this case, however, since facts are never likely to be forthcoming now, we may permit conjecture. My knowledge of nautical matters is not great, but I imagine that to a man of Murchison's resource and opportunities the placing of some form of incendiary fuse in a cargo of cotton would present few difficulties. Indeed, so great is my admiration of Murchison that I would give him credit for arranging some device by himself whereby the ignition of the fuse could be controlled. You must admit that it happened very opportunely for his plans. Conditions were such that he dare not put back, nor could his vessel be saved in the sea that was running. Yet there was a liner sufficiently close to take off the captain and the crew. On the whole, I am inclined to think that the loss of the *Brackenthorpe Manor* was a crime comparable with the successive murders of the two Heatherdales. Mind, I have nothing with which to substantiate this opinion.'

'Two murders, an attempt to defraud the underwriters, and finally suicide,' remarked Hanslet. 'I wonder what he would have turned his hand to next if he had brought it off?'

'Having achieved his purpose, he would no doubt have become a most excellent citizen,' replied the Professor positively. 'I do not imagine that he was a lover of crime for crime's sake. He saw only one way of extricating himself from his difficulties, and allowed no consideration of any kind to stand in his way. His actions were all framed towards one definite end, that of securing a competence by which he

could live.'

'Not a bad effort for one man single-handed,' remarked Hanslet.

'Not at all,' agreed the Professor. 'But men of Murchison's type are rare.'

'Thank God for that!' exclaimed Hanslet, and at the fervency of his tones even the Professor could not repress a smile.